

“I am delighted by the opportunity to learn about Maria Gabriella and her remarkable life, so poignantly documented in her letters and in the notebooks of Mother Pia. Lavich’s English translation flows smoothly, and I found myself easily caught up in the gripping events of her life. The book was difficult to put down, as I felt simultaneously dismayed yet joyful, but most of all compelled to continue forward on my own spiritual journey. As a researcher of Italian female saints, this book is a must-read. If you love saints, then you’ll love this book.”

— Molly Morrison
Associate Professor of Italian
Ohio University

“Add Blessed Maria Gabriella to the list of great monastic letter writers of the twentieth century like Merton and Leclercq. In this volume of her letters she emerges from the cloister with the clarity, sensitivity, and preciousness of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. One need not be a monastic to fall under her spell of love and devotion to both God and the monastic way of life.”

— Deacon Mark Plaiss
Author of *No End to the Search: Experiencing Monastic Life*

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER FIFTY-SEVEN

**The Letters of
Blessed Maria Gabriella
with the Notebooks of
Mother Pia Gullini**

Translated by
David Lavich, OCSO

Bl. Gabriella Sagheddu

Introduction by
Mariella Carpinello



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Preface

Even a cursory survey of monastic literature will soon reveal that most of it is an exposition of the wisdom teaching or spiritual theology of abbots and abbesses. Consider the Desert Fathers and Mothers or the great abbots and abbesses of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century monastic world. What they said or wrote, although intended primarily for the members of their community, eventually attracted the attention of many outside the cloister, including academic theologians and even popes. Their theology, which was never seen as a separation from their lived spiritual experience, influenced the shape and flavor of their times, especially the medieval church. Indeed, this literature continues to inspire and engage a diverse spectrum of people today.

This being said, it is obvious that most of the ordinary monks and nuns remained in the shadows, convinced of the apostolic fruitfulness of their hidden monastic life. This conviction of course corresponds to Saint Benedict's Rule for Monasteries: "If in fact speaking and teaching are the master's task, the disciple is to be silent and listen" (RB 6.6). In the Cistercian tradition and especially within the Trappist context, this silence that fosters prayer and interior recollection was observed continually, and consequently little is known of the lives or personalities of the individual monks or nuns except what may have been noted about them and kept in the archives of their monasteries.

Sometimes, however, a light shines out from the shadows of the cloister and catches the attention of people far beyond

the monastery. Such is the case of Blessed Maria Gabriella Sagheddu, who died in 1939 at the Italian Trappist monastery of Grottaferrata (which was transferred to Vitorchiano in 1957) at the age of twenty-five years, after having offered her life for the cause of Christian unity. Pope Saint John Paul II referred to her as “Gabriella of Unity” and proposed her as an example of spiritual ecumenism, referring to her in paragraph 27 of his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* of 1995:

Praying for unity is not a matter reserved only to those who actually experience the lack of unity among Christians. In the deep personal dialogue which each of us must carry on with the Lord in prayer, concern for unity cannot be absent. Only in this way, in fact, will that concern fully become part of the reality of our life and of the commitments we have taken on in the Church. It was in order to reaffirm this duty that I set before the faithful of the Catholic Church a model which I consider exemplary, the model of a Trappistine Sister, *Blessed Maria Gabriella of Unity*, whom I beatified on 25 January 1983. Sister Maria Gabriella, called by her vocation to be apart from the world, devoted her life to meditation and prayer centered on chapter seventeen of Saint John’s Gospel, and offered her life for Christian unity. This is truly the cornerstone of all prayer: the total and unconditional offering of one’s life to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The example of Sister Maria Gabriella is instructive; it helps us to understand that there are no special times, situations or places of prayer for unity. Christ’s prayer to the Father is offered as a model for everyone, always and everywhere.¹

In light of the fact that the monastery of Grottaferrata was poor economically and somewhat lacking in cultural resources, something emerged that is both refreshing and unexpected.

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*: On Commitment to Ecumenism, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html.

At a time in Italy and beyond when the word *ecumenism* was hardly known, this monastery became a pioneer center of prayer for unity as well as an established partner in contacts with non-Roman Catholic Christians, mostly because of the wise and forward-thinking abbess, Mother Pia Gullini. Furthermore, unknowingly, Sr. Gabriella's self-offering of love for the church became a focal point of interest and enthusiasm for the cause of unity.

Christians devoted to ecumenism will naturally be interested in the letters of this simple nun, whose name will always be linked with the cause of ecumenism. Others will intuit from these letters to her family and abbess that here is something honest, true, heroic, very human, and very spiritual. Perhaps that is because an authentic pure love stronger than death always astonishes us. Another point of interest might concern Sr. Gabriella's relationship with her abbess. Little has been written about such relationships in the context of an enclosed monastic community of women. Here the reader can discover the strength and delicacy of two very different women determined with all their might to go together straight to the goal.

Other than an interest in the personality of a saint, what can these simple letters of Gabriella transmit to us? If this is monastic literature, what can it teach the reader? Perhaps we can take a clue from the first sentence of the first letter of Gabriella to her mother that appears in this volume. Here we read of her arrival at the Trappist monastery at Grottaferrata: "With great pleasure I write to you to let you know that I arrived at my destination." It would later be revealed how truly she did arrive at her destination, which was to live in the heart of the church that will, in God's time, be united. Running with all her strength and love, she reached her goal with the unfailing help of her mentor, Mother Pia. And she can teach others how to do the same. Her message is that the way to self-fulfillment is self-donation; only a love stronger than death will satisfy.

In his apostolic exhortation on the call to holiness, *Gaudete et exsultate* (#5) of March 19, 2018, Pope Francis cites Blessed

Maria Gabriella as an example of holiness through the gift of her life for the cause of unity: “The processes of beatification and canonization recognize the signs of heroic virtue, the sacrifice of one’s life in martyrdom, and certain cases where a life is constantly offered for others, even until death. This shows an exemplary imitation of Christ, one worthy of the admiration of the faithful. We can think, for example, of Blessed Maria Gabriella Sagheddu, who offered her life for the unity of Christians.”²

The monastery of Vitorchiano testifies to an increased interest in Blessed Gabriella in the English-speaking world, building a relationship with some Benedictine Anglican monasteries in England, particularly Mirfield, and correspondence with people in the USA, Australia, and the Philippines. This English edition of the *Letters* follows on the French and Spanish editions. The French edition, published by Abbaye Val Notre-Dame Editions, appeared in 2010: *Lettres de la Trappe—Gabriella de l’Unité*. The Spanish edition, *Cartas desde la Trapa—Beata Ma Gabriella Sagheddu*, appeared in 2015 from Editorial Monte Carmelo.

Professor Mariella Carpinello, who is the editor of the Italian edition and author of the Introduction to this volume, is a proficient writer on women’s monastic history and spirituality. She has the advantage of being close to the subject both culturally and through familiarity with the monastic community of Vitorchiano. Professor Carpinello’s research into the archives of Vitorchiano offers to the reader the fruit of her professional work. It is doubtful that the *Letters* as presented in this volume could be understood without all her helpful background references and information in the introduction. The remarks jotted down by Gabriella’s abbess in her *Notebooks* in response

² Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*: Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today’s World, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html.

to inquiries about Gabriella prove a valuable insight into her personal character and virtue as witnessed by the person who was spiritually the closest to her.

Similarly, Sr. Maria Paola's article quotes extensively from both the *Letters* and from Mother Pia Gullini's *Notebooks* as well as from other archival materials. Her own experience as seen and lived from inside Bl. Gabriella's present-day community of Vitorchiano brings an added enrichment to this volume. Undoubtedly her acquaintance with some surviving nuns who knew both Mother Pia and Bl. Gabriella is invaluable. Finally, the article by Dom Mark Scott, abbot of New Melleray Abbey in Iowa (United States), brings to this volume an insight into the relevance of the subject viewed at a distance from its European context.

The reader of this volume will quickly discover that this is not just a story of a young woman who died at an early age of tuberculosis in a Trappist monastery. No disease and no one took her life from her. She gave her life, and she didn't bargain to take it back. Gabriella understood her self-offering as made to God and accepted by him for the sake of the unity of his church—the whole church, the whole body of Christ. In a time of increasing national, political, and faith-related divisions, she remains as a silent prophet of unity and peace. This is not an invitation to others to make an offering of one's life in the same way that she felt called to do; that would be foolish. Nevertheless, it is an invitation to join her on the road that leads from division and brokenness to unity. As a monastic teacher Gabriella demonstrates that faith, hope, and love are more powerful than clever arguments or unyielding positions, and it is a love stronger than death that wins out in the end.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Dr. Mariella Carpinello, editor of the Italian edition of the *Lettere dalla Trappa* and author of the Introduction of this volume, and to Sr. Maria Paola Santachiara, OCSO, for

their agreement to this English translation of their work. Thanks also to Dom Mark Scott, abbot of New Melleray Abbey, Iowa, USA, for his willingness to have his article appear in this volume.

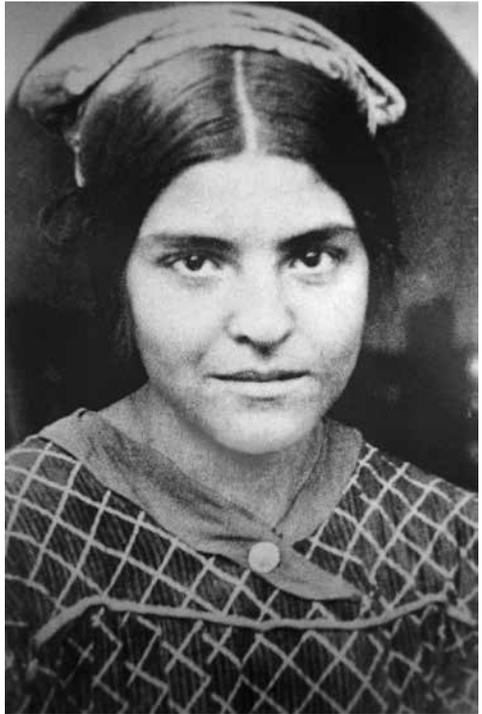
I am also grateful for the assistance given to me by Professor Roberto Taglienti, instructor of the Italian language in Rome, for helping me decipher some challenging Italian expressions, and to Sr. Kathleen Riley, OCSO, of the Abbey of Vitorchiano, for assistance in proper English usages.

Special recognition must be given to Sr. Gabriella Masturzo, OCSO, nun of Vitorchiano and Postulatrix for the causes of the saints of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, for her unfailing and prompt assistance in confirming or seeking further information pertinent to the subject.

Finally, I can only acknowledge with praise and admiration the tireless work of Dr. Marsha Dutton, Executive Editor, Cistercian Publications, for her patience and attention to professional standards as well as the long hours spent in making this volume possible.

David P. Lavich, OCSO

Blessed Gabriella Sagheddu (1914–1939) as she appeared when she arrived at the Italian Trappist monastery of Grottaferrata in 1935. (Photo taken to make her identity card needed to leave Dorgali and travel to the monastery of Grottaferrata.)



Mother Maria Pia Gullini, abbess of Grottaferrata from 1931 to 1940 and from 1946 to 1951.





Unity Chapel at the Trappist monastery of Vitorchiano with the urn that contains the body of Blessed Gabriella. (The remains were transferred from Grottaferrata in 1975 and buried in the Unity Chapel after the beatification on January 25, 1983.)

Aerial view of the monastery of Vitorchiano (Viterbo), Italy.



Introduction¹

Mariella Carpinello

According to Saint John the Evangelist, a few hours before Jesus' arrest, thinking of the disciples and the Christians of future times, Jesus addressed the following words to the Father:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (John 17:20–23)

In the small volume of Gabriella Sagheddu's gospel book the page that corresponds to this text is worn from frequent readings. Her name is now linked to the same text in the basic acts of the Church dedicated to ecumenical questions. *Gabriella of Unity*: this is the name used by John Paul II when referring to her in paragraph 27 of his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* of 1995:

¹ Translated by David Lavich, OCSO, from the Italian as printed in Gabriella dell'Unita (Bl. Maria Gabriella Sagheddu), *Lettere dalla Trappa*, ed. Mariella Carpinello (Milan: Edizioni San Paolo, 2006). Some section headers in this translation are not found in the original text. Words in brackets are provided by the translator.

2 *The Letters of Blessed Maria Gabriella*

Sister Maria Gabriella, called by her vocation to be apart from the world, devoted her life to meditation and prayer centered on chapter seventeen of Saint John's Gospel, and offered her life for Christian unity.²

Sr. Gabriella's story as a nun took place within the secret of a Trappist monastery in the Lazio countryside more than half a century before that encyclical was written.

Her Life

Maria Sagheddu, who took the name of Maria Gabriella in religion, was born on March 17, 1914, in the village of Dorgali, in Sardinia. Imagine the sheer beauty of Sardinia in the early years of the twentieth century, still steeped in its ancient pastoral civilization, celebrated by travelers across the Alps for its archaic features and the harsh yet hospitable temper of its people. Little Maria resembled the natural and human landscape of her homeland: stubborn, impetuous, rebellious, and strong-willed. After her death, when the first scholars came to visit Dorgali in order to construct her biography, her mother, siblings, friends, and teachers all described a girl who was indomitable and had little inclination for religious practices. She herself, after becoming a nun, confessed that in her early years she had been impatient, intolerant, and opposed to anything contrary to the affirmation of her own will. But, in view of her future, we can imagine that this little girl, kicking and agitated, already carried inside her something restless and something incompatible with commonly accepted views, something that placed her in constant collision with her surroundings.

When she was only a few years old, an epidemic of the Spanish flu deprived her of her father, grandmother, and a brother. Certainly those sudden deaths hurt her deeply, as is

² Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*: On Commitment to Ecumenism.

pointed out in the biographies that trace the reasons for her religious sensibility.³ Moreover, early deaths were frequent in those years in the villages of Sardinia, among people still struggling to survive. Every family had its share.

Intelligent and lively, Maria benefited from elementary school until the sixth grade but was then forced by poverty to leave school, to pursue housework and help the family in the countryside. Although encouraged by her mother, she was bored by going to church. Nevertheless she distinguished herself by her generosity in lavishing herself on those in need, even on one occasion for the sake of a woman of ill fame. She was also devoid of malice and allowed herself to be teased without taking offense, having fun laughing at herself. At seventeen years of age, she lagged behind her peers in preparing for Confirmation, but, being older, she prepared with greater mindfulness, and she discovered horizons of interiority previously ignored.

Modesty was so much a part of Maria's nature that the men of the country, congregating at night in the square to watch the girls come up from the river with their washed clothes, complained that they never got to see her eyes. At eighteen she was a naive beauty, silhouetted in the brown colors of the women of this land. In her picture taken for her identity card—which has now become well known throughout the world—we

³ Cf. Celestino Testore, *Suor Maria Gabriella trappista* (Vitorchiano: Monastero di N.S. di S. Giuseppe, 1958); Monica Della Volpe, *La strada della gratitudine: Suor Maria Gabriella* (Milan: Jaca Books, 1983); Paolino Beltrame Quattrocchi, *La Beata Maria Gabriella dell'Unità* (Vitorchiano: Monastero di N.S. di S. Giuseppe, 1983).

English biographies include the translation of the last of these: Paolino Beltrame Quattrocchi, *A Life for Unity, Sr. Maria Gabriella*, trans. Sr. Maria Jeremiah (New York: New City Press, 1990). Further citations of Quattrocchi, however, refer to the Italian original. See also Martha Driscoll, *A Silent Herald of Unity: The Life of Maria Gabriella Sagheddu*, Cistercian Studies Series 199 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990); and Pearse Cusak, *Blessed Gabriella of Unity: A Patron for the Ecumenical Movement* (Ros Cré, Ireland: Cistercian Press, 1995).

meet her affectionate eyes, which remain rather private; we see the sketches of a smile that does not diminish the seriousness of her expression, at the same time sad and happy. Several opposites make up her face, childish yet aware.

In the same year⁴ Maria's seventeen-year-old sister Giovanna Antonia died. Suddenly the turmoil of Maria's character subsided, and Maria began to spend a lot of time in church. She also participated in Catholic Action, which until then she had declined to attend, and which joined together the great ideals launched by Armida Barelli: ministry, heroism, and the Eucharist. Above all, her character became gentler. During this period she received some marriage proposals, one of which she kept in reserve for some time before answering, but she finally refused it. Only the pastor of Dorgali, Father Basilio Meloni, knew why. Maria had received her call.

It should be noted that the first step towards the religious life of Maria Sagheddu was well supported by this zealous and well-educated priest, who helped her to resolve the first unknowns. Maria trusted him unconditionally, while he knew how to listen with full respect, recognizing a genuine contemplative vocation, perhaps the vocation most difficult to accept for a mother and family considering the prospect of a drastic and final separation. The first decision to make was where to go to pursue her vocation, but Maria didn't know. She had never been out of her own region. The call that she had received summoned her irresistibly, but the how and where remained unknown. Don Meloni had contacts with the Trappist monastery of Grottaferrata, a hill town of Castelli Romani, and he had already sent a friend of Maria's, Maddalena Fancello, there. So to the question "Do you want to go to Grottaferrata?" she replied, "Send me where you will," and the priest concluded, "You will surely go to Grottaferrata."⁵ With those few

⁴ Actually apparently the next year, when Gabriella was eighteen (ed.).

⁵ Concerning the relationship between Gabriella and Father Meloni, see Dionigi Spanu, "La Beata M. Gabriella Sagheddu (1914–1939) nella testimonianza del suo padre spirituale Don Basilio Meloni (1900–1967)," *La palestra del clero*, I, nos. 1–2 (2001): 79–100, here 84.

words, which were sufficient given the trust between them, everything was resolved. A few years later, when the trial of Maria had been completed, Father Meloni claimed to have “that supernatural affection for her that a shepherd of souls has for his spiritual daughters.”⁶

It is worth pausing for a moment on this *supernatural affection* intrinsic to the gospels—think of the tears of Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb on Easter morning, as the voice of the Risen One calls to her. We can think of the *apophthegmata* of the Desert Fathers, especially the story of the young John of Lyco, who was ordered by a senior monk to water a stick planted in the sand every day. Without asking the motive for this foolish command, John ran every day for some kilometers in the hot sun to get water and irrigate the dry branch, which after three years bloomed prodigiously. Blind obedience, full of spiritual content, which brought humanity to the era before the rebellion of Adam, would also bear fruit in the case of Maria. Thus Father Meloni, when testifying for her beatification, could write, “I feel reverence for her,” explaining implicitly that the submission of this girl did not mean the passivity of the inexperienced before those who know, but faith.

Moreover, the reciprocal roles of these two persons, although functioning in a hierarchy, did not relegate the inferior person to a minor position; rather, it won veneration on the part of the superior. Now this relationship between Maria and Don Basilio Meloni was all the more precious considering that they were living in the mid-1930s, when the Second World War was about to break out, and that during the postwar reconstruction the sense of the value and beauty of such a relationship would be lost even in the spheres of consecrated life. Later generations were to suffer for a long time, consciously or not, from the absence of fathers. For her part, Maria knew that to respond to God, more than making choices and observations, meant entrusting herself to him, and because of this docility,

⁶ Spanu, “La Beata,” 83.

her entry into religion was easy. Her mother recounts the same thing when saying their final *goodbyes*:

I remember the day she left; I was crying as I said *goodbye*. Maria asked me the reason for my tears and said, "Why are you crying; aren't you even worthy of having a daughter who is a nun?" And then I said, "Go with God and he will help you." I resigned myself and said, "Rather than return home, God will take you to Heaven." She was walked to the bus only by a cousin who carried her suitcase because Don Meloni would not have been happy if a lot of people had gone there to bid her farewell.⁷

She and her mother were never to see each other again.

Even during the journey Maria felt escorted by her father confessor, who had discerned this [vocation] for her. We find peace in the letter where she describes to her mother the majesty of the Roman churches, which must have looked amazing for a country girl but which nevertheless did not distract her from the confident desire she had to arrive early at her destination.

Finally Maria reached the Trappist monastery of Grottaferata. It was September 30, 1935. She was twenty years old, shining with strength and health, her long black hair gathered in thick braids that surrounded her head like a crown. She wore the traditional costume of Dorgali—a long skirt, jacket, and fringed shawl—in the colors of her country, recalling the sea, the fires of the shepherds, sheep's wool, cork forests, and pastures. The abbess, Mother Pia Gullini, who in her youth had been a fine painter, describes her appearance thus:

⁷ *Positio super virtutibus, Beatificationis et Canonizationis Mariae Gabriellae Sagheddu, moniale professaie O.C.S.O.*, p. 32. This is the document or collection of documents used in the process by which a person is declared Venerable, the second of the four steps on the path to Roman Catholic sainthood.

She was beautiful, but her modesty hid her like a veil. . . .

Her stature was slightly above average. . . . Broad forehead and beautiful, bright large eyes with a deep expression and so transparent that when she came to see me, I had the impression of seeing her soul. . . .

Her mouth was rather large, but her smile had a sweetness, a stunning beauty that revealed her teeth, white and straight, which manifested youth and health. The chin was broad and very strong-willed. Hers was a classic profile.⁸

Maria's first letters home told of her attentive interest when going out to meet situations that she didn't yet understand but that she already loved. Leaving Dorgali without knowing precisely what a Trappistine monastery was, she would soon become a Trappistine because of her careful attention, and, indeed, she would somehow become the very prototype of a Trappistine nun in the eyes of the world.

The Trappist monastery of Grottaferrata, or Grotta, as its name was simplified by these religious—evoking the cave of Bethlehem and the many caves of Western Christianity where monastic life was nestled through the centuries—was one of the most active centers of asceticism on the Italian peninsula. There the Rule of Saint Benedict was observed following the customs and practices of the Cistercian spirituality of Bernard of Clairvaux and the reform of Armand de Rancé, the abbot of legendary rigor who lived at the end of the seventeenth century in the French abbey of La Grande Trappe and was devoted to the primitive austerity of Benedictine monasticism.⁹ The regimen of fasting, working in poverty, and spiritual diligence that was maintained at Grotta could not be tolerated by everyone who aspired to it: some postulants were

⁸ From Mother M. Pia Gullini's "Notebooks" for Gaston Zananiri, biographer of Gabriella, now in the Vitorchiano Archives; see pages 143–66 below.

⁹ Anna Maria Caneva, *Il riformatore della Trappa: Vita di Armand Jean De Rancé* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1996).

sent back home, and others chose by themselves to abandon the field.

The history of the Italian Trappistines, which began in the late nineteenth century, unfolds in its entirety from a vocation to this very austerity. Indeed, from difficult beginnings, the lack of resources, and extreme poverty, a community gathered together by the persistence of the French Teresa Astoin on the hill of Saint Vito near Turin was opposed by the bishop, misunderstood by the brothers, and finally transferred to Grottaferrata to be subject to the direction of the neighboring monks of Frattocchie. When Maria Sagheddu entered, the community included some of the old protagonists of that early adventure, which the monastic authorities had declared to be doomed to failure, but from which would come—as had been expected by the courageous founders—an abundant and expansive progeny.¹⁰

Mother Pia

The abbess of Grotta, as we have seen, was Mother Pia Gullini. Her teaching is inextricably grafted into the story of Gabriella Sagheddu, so that today it is impossible to consider one without the other, although their personalities were poles apart. In temperament, Mother Pia resembles the major figures of Christian history: the heroines of the Old Testament, the founders and the mystics of every season. Like other women who populated the history of Western monasticism, she was also a personification of the Rule, which she embodied without fail; she was a unique personality from whom arose the practice of a vigorous asceticism that did not extinguish the qualities unique to her nature; if anything, they were strengthened. Her biographical itinerary took place under the sign of a fearless acceptance of God's will.

¹⁰ For the history of the Italian Trappistines see Monica Della Volpe, *La Strada*, and Mariella Carpinello, *Il monachesimo femminile* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002).

Mother Pia, in the world Maria Elena Gullini, was born in 1892 in Bologna into a family of the upper middle class and received the refined education of the daughters of her class. She lived in Rome for twenty years, cultivating the study of languages, painting, and music, and frequented high society, receptions, court dances, sports clubs, and charities. She often traveled abroad with her father, an industrial manager who held a high position in the Ministry of Communications, in order to open new sections of the railway. Photos of her early youth portray her cutting tricolor ribbons and receiving flowers. A friend, remembering when they first met, wrote that she was “a beauty, of extraordinary elegance, with dress and hat which at that time were called *da carrozza* (‘lady in a carriage’).” She added: “She was very refined, cultured, and intelligent, with a golden voice, a smile, and a charm which she has always preserved.”¹¹

In 1916, having refused numerous requests for marriage, Maria Elena decided to enter religion, defining her intention in one sentence: “My way is love.” Such a phrase could not be taken for granted in the early twentieth century, when the choice for the cloister still corresponded more to the idea of the deprivation of a penitent rather than to the choice for full happiness. She would discover later that her project was the same as that of Thérèse of the Child Jesus: “As soon as I had in my hands the first publication of the *Story of a Soul*, my joy was at its height. The road on which I had been walking was sure: a ‘little sister’ had gone ahead, and therefore I would not go wrong.”¹²

At twenty-five, Maria Elena joined the renowned Trappist Abbey of Laval, in Normandy. In this French community the young Italian novice with such an exuberant temperament appeared too “eccentric,” so many years later some sisters still

¹¹ From a private testimony of a companion of her youth, Archives of Vitorchiano.

¹² Quoted in a manuscript of M. Pia to Sr. Fara Crapanzano, Archives of Vitorchiano.

remembered her unconventional mannerisms with amazement. On the other hand, Maria Elena, who in religion was called Maria Pia, adapted quickly to the needs of Trappist life, which was a good match for her determination. This response could easily be seen in her work on the farm, in doing lowly and sometimes repulsive tasks, and in a series of struggles quite foreign to her life as an elegant young woman who had grown up in comfort, with intense intellectual interests and admired for her charm. But having arrived at her goal of consecration in a luxurious sleeping car, she was then placed overnight in the strict confines of every renunciation.

In any case Maria Elena's adaptation was immediate. Dazzled by love for the God-man, she claimed that the beginnings [of her vocation] included understanding that "to love is to obey" and learning to embrace "the Constitutions and Usages as one embraces Love."¹³ Later she noted in her *vademecum*, her handbook, "I did not come to the Trappists because I was attracted by the spirit of penance or the work; no! I came in order to love the Lord better."¹⁴

Maria Pia's conception of monastic life was very high, even heroic, and she had the gift of transmitting her fervor. Becoming mistress of the lay sisters of Laval, most of whom were peasants from Normandy, she brought them to an ascetic standard they were unable to maintain after she was gone. Vital and indefatigable, her character was reminiscent of the early Cistercians, the founders of Molesme, Cîteaux, and Clairvaux, monks of severe asceticism, serious study, and hard manual work, with an inclination toward mystical joy: able men ready for everything.

In 1926 the major superiors asked the young professed nun to return to Italy, assigning her to the Trappist monastery of Grottaferrata, in the expectation that soon she would become

¹³ M. Pia Gullini, *Lettere e scritti di Madre Pia*, ed. Ennio Francia (Rome: Messa degli artisti, 1971), 5.

¹⁴ Gullini, *Lettere e scritti*, 149.

the leader. She described her return as a “sacrifice.” To leave France, which had always been the great home of Western monasticism, the land of Cluny, Cîteaux, the Grande Chartreuse, the Grande Trappe, and the liturgical revival of Dom Guéranger¹⁵ in the post-revolutionary and post-Napoleonic era, involved a sort of demotion. The differences between Laval and Grotta were considerable, as was women’s monasticism generally between the French and the Italians. The French nuns were cultured and lived their charism while taking into consideration their social and secular cultural context, whereas in Italy, women’s monasticism was intellectually poor and influenced by a clerical mentality that obscured part of their specific spiritual merit.

Grotta, however, though poor materially and intellectually, was a truly fervent community and was soon ready to rise up in a new direction. When Gabriella entered in 1935, Mother Pia had been abbess for four years and had already imprinted her untiring influence on the community. She had at her side as mistress of novices Mother Tecla Fontana, another extraordinary monastic figure, who came to the contemplative life after spending twenty-five years as a Franciscan missionary in Egypt, teaching Italian in an institute in Cairo. Both Mother Pia and Mother Tecla had returned to Italy after having adopted another country, and so they possessed an understanding of diversity in peoples and mentalities. For both of them, consecration had meant opening themselves to differences. In the internal relationships among sisters, the community, which numbered fifty-four nuns, must have reflected this different, wider appreciation, opposed to exclusive particularisms. For when Gabriella entered she felt well liked not only by the mothers who were the leaders in this hierarchy but also by the sisters (See Letters 1 and 3).

¹⁵ See Gregorio Penco, *Il monachesimo frà spiritualità e cultura* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000).

The Letters of Blessed Gabriella¹

1. To her Mother

Grottaferrata, October 2, 1935

Dearest Mamma,

With great pleasure I write to you to let you know that I arrived at my destination. I have been here since Monday at noon, but I am outside [the enclosure]² for a few days, perhaps until the end of the week. The trip went very well in the car as well as in the train and the steamer.

Gavina³ was so kind to me in Rome; she showed me many churches and took me to climb the Scala Santa, and so I send you this little picture that I took there as a remembrance. She also took me to St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran, very beautiful churches, but the church of St. Praxedes is also beautiful, where one sees the column to which Jesus was tied during the scourging.

And how are you all? Is the time of sorrow past? I hope so, because you have to resign yourself and instead be happy,

¹ This translation is based on the Italian text: *Lettere dalla Trappa*, ed. Mariella Carpinello (Milan: Edizioni San Paolo, 2006). That text respected the spelling of the original text, even when incorrect, with slightly modified punctuation. This translation prints letters by M. Pia Gullini and her ecumenical correspondents in italics to distinguish them from Sr. Gabriella's letters.

² On arrival Maria was received in the guesthouse. She entered the monastic enclosure five days later.

³ The woman who accompanied Maria during the ferry trip from Dorgali and hosted her in Rome.

thinking that it is a great grace that the Lord gave me, for which I was unworthy. Thank God, I am fine, and I want you to know that they have dressed me as a *signorina*.⁴ I spoke with the Reverend Mother Superior, and she told me that Sunday will be the ceremony of reception of the habit for Sister Rosa, that is, Maddalena. Remember to pray for her and for me on that day, because we need it.⁵

If you knew how good the Reverend Superior is! She seems more a heavenly mother than an earthly one. That's how good her advice and her words are, and the Novice Mistress, with whom I've spoken today, is also very good.

If you heard the choir sisters sing you would say it seems like a great number of angels and not people.

Everything here inspires peace and quiet in me, and I hope, with the help of the Lord, to be just fine; I'll write again when I go into the enclosure.

My affection I leave with you all, my brother, sister, and brother-in-law; say hello to all the relatives and neighbors, Grandma Francesca, and Grandma Michela, and let me know if she is healed and if she had the operation.

Greetings to Maria Fancello, Anna Pateri, Michelangela, and Mallena Lai, and tell Maria to greet the president⁶ and the sisters of Giuseppedda's circle. Finally, warmest regards to you all, because if I were to write the names of everyone there wouldn't be enough paper.

I kiss your hands and ask you to bless me.

Your daughter,
Maria Sagheddu

⁴ Maria arrived at the monastery in her traditional Dorgali dress; she was now wearing the black dress of the postulants.

⁵ Maddalena Fancello, one of the young women of Dorgali, entered the Trappist monastery of Grottaferrata on the advice of Father Meloni.

⁶ The president of the Young Women's circle of Catholic Action, Caterina Anna Secci Gisella.

2. To her Mother

Grottaferrata, October 7, 1935

Praised be Jesus Christ

Dearest Mamma,

The other day I wrote you a letter to let you know of my arrival, and now I am writing this note in order to send it in Sister Rosa's letter. My health is fine, and I hope that so is yours and the family's.

I want you to know that Saturday night I entered the community, and yesterday, the day of Our Lady of the Rosary, is the first day I spent in the Lord's house. Yesterday the clothing ceremony of Sister Rosa and the profession of Sister Michela took place.⁷

It was so beautiful and at the same time moving to see the two young women kneeling and waiting, one dressed in white and wearing a crown of roses, receiving a blessing for herself and for the new habit she was going to wear, and the other who in front of all declared herself to be the faithful spouse of Jesus Christ for life.

Pray, Mother, that this day will come for me too, that I will not have come here to see the sights but to remain always as a faithful spouse of Jesus. Don't think that now that I'm in the enclosure everything that you always heard about it is true, as, for example, that the food and drink of the sisters comes to each one through a turnstyle in the wall; no, we are very well in the refectory and we all eat together.

As for the place, it is a true paradise on earth. When I went out for a walk yesterday I saw the grapevines, which are a marvel, because they are still full of grapes; I also saw the vegetables, cabbage, fennel, and, in short, everything that can be in a vegetable garden. Today I took a walk in the garden and saw the few flowers that are still there now, but there are

⁷ Michela Dui, who offered her life for the sanctification of priests and died of tuberculosis on July 23, 1939.

also flower beds for the flowers of other seasons, and there's a beautiful statue of St. Joseph with baby Jesus that stands out among the green ivy.

Enough for today, the rest I'll tell you another time. Let me know if Salvatore is back and how he is, and if he was on time to get to the car.⁸ My affectionate regards to you and all the family; say hello to all the neighbors and acquaintances, aunts, and cousins, and Grandma Michela, and tell Maria to send my regards to all her companions. Once again, best wishes to all.

Your daughter,
Maria Sagheddu

Your daughter is fine; she is happy and has received the name Sister Maria Gabriella. Pray that she will be a saint and a blessing to her family. With religious sentiments,

Sister Maria Pia, abbess

3. To her Mother

Grottaferrata, October 17, 1935

Sacred Heart of Jesus, help us who trust in you

Dearest Mamma,

The other day I received your letter and was glad to hear that you are all well. I too enjoy excellent health.

I have found many sisters here who are fond of me: I think there are more than fifty of us.

The day before entering the enclosure I met and spoke with Sister Margherita, who is very content, doing quite well now, and she sends her greetings to her relatives and to all.⁹ On Sunday, that is, after the ceremony, I spoke with Sister Rosa. She is also happy to be here, and that day was even happier

⁸ Maria Gabriella's brother.

⁹ Originally from Dorgali.

for her, as you can imagine, because she wore the garments of the bride of Jesus. Don't think that I have forgotten you, for, as a matter of fact, I pray more to the Lord to grant you the graces that you require for your temporal and eternal life.

The last time I wrote, I forgot to tell you that my belongings arrived in Rome a few days after my arrival, but they were received at the Generalate of the Fathers, who weren't able to send them up here till today. But rest assured because, as I said, everything went very well.

The day I arrived here I seemed to be lost in a foreign place, but today that's not so; it doesn't seem as though I'm in the midst of people whom until twenty days ago I had never seen; instead I feel as if I am among people among whom I was born, lived, and grew up with.

It's so beautiful to live in the house of the Lord. The hours of prayer are fixed, and so is the time for work, so that no one goes around according to her whim, and only in the moments of each interval can one read or write, or go to the church as she wishes. As to the hour of rising, the novices and professed rise at 2:00 a.m., but I and some other postulants who are still in their first month here get up at four.

The work can be in the vineyard, the vegetable garden, or also in the community. The silence, I tell you, is such a beautiful thing because this way we don't criticize or murmur as in our hometown, but each goes about her business and does not think of anything else.

If you saw the sisters speaking with the signs¹⁰ you'd certainly laugh and say, "Oh! So many deaf mutes!" Mute, yes, but willingly, for God's sake. Sometimes I laugh when I speak, because I still don't know all the signs, and I don't always understand. Ask the Lord to help me not only to understand what they say to me, but also to put the teachings into practice, that is, to obey the superiors and to observe exactly the rule of my Institute [Order], and so become holy before God.

¹⁰ That is, Cistercian hand signs.

As for my name, I hope you will like it: it's the beautiful name of the Archangel Gabriel, whom the Lord chose to announce to Mary that great event.

In Jesus, I'll finish now with my greetings to all of you, my brother, sister, brother-in-law, and children. Regards to the family of Aunt Daddai and all the other aunts and relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances and everyone who asks for me. I hope that Grandma Michela is healed, and tell her that I have already prayed that the Lord will hear her.

Your daughter,
Sister Gabriella

Greet Mr. Muceli and his family, and, when he writes, send them my regards.

4. To Father Basilio Meloni

Grottaferrata, December 1935

Very Reverend Father,

The other day Reverend Mother gave me news of you, and I was very happy. She gave me permission to write sooner, but I didn't have time. Reverend Mother told me that you were transferred to Ollolai, and so I think that my village will have to resign itself to its loss. In this, too, we must see the will of God. I wish you well in this new parish assignment; you can work among these people as you desire and gather abundant fruit from your labors.

These people will not be ungrateful, and I hope they will correspond generously to your loving care.

As for me I am fine in health and in every respect. Although our life is cloistered we can get fresh air whenever we want because we have a large estate.

The silence that is practiced here suits me, and I find it much better than mundane chatter.

We are fifty-four nuns. We do not speak except to Reverend Mother and to Mother Mistress, while with the others we use

signs and a smile of greeting. Nevertheless, our needs can be expressed and we are satisfied.

There is some opposition within me, but I think this stems from pride and the contrast of my worldly spirit to the religious spirit that reigns in the community, and I hope that with the Lord's help and by my conforming to the monastic usages, the difficulties will soon disappear. As for everything else, the satisfactions that one feels in the house of the Lord overcome the setbacks, not only the small ones, but even the greater ones.

The Lord is increasingly merciful to me, although I am unworthy and do not respond well to such goodness.

He wanted me closer to him because Reverend Mother placed me in the choir for the psalmody and to sing his praises. I should be very grateful and give thanks for this special grace accorded to me, but you can imagine, Reverend Father, how confusing it is for me, who never really understood music and singing. Nonetheless, I do everything possible to study it and hope that Jesus, if he really wants me, will help me.

For my happiness I must be grateful to you who worked so much for me, and I sincerely thank you. Indebted to you as I am, and not knowing how to express my gratitude, I always pray that the Lord will supply and reward you greatly, blessing all your undertakings and granting the graces you need.

I will never forget you, and I believe that I'm not hoping in vain when I trust in your prayers for me.

Please accept my sentiments of respect.

Kissing your hand I ask your paternal blessing.

Always your daughter in Jesus Christ,

Sister Maria Gabriella Sagheddu

Santa Flora, December 4, 1935

✠ *Good Reverend Father,*

Thank you for your letter. If Sister Rosa and Sister Gabriella continue as they have begun, believe me, the Lord will be glorified and we will be very delighted. There is a true religious spirit in those

two daughters, and that is the only important thing, although they are also very generous in everything. Sister Gabriella has a lot of trouble singing, but it is surmountable, I hope, with practice and effort. She is simple and serious and picks things up quickly.

As for Maria Fancello, I agree perfectly with your opinion.¹¹ Also, we are so full that for the moment the Superiors advise against receiving anyone else. The Lord knows what he is doing. It is beautiful to abandon ourselves to him with full and blind faith.

“Dominus tecum” in your new evangelical mission field. The One who sent you: “semper est tecum.”¹² May you repeat that with Jesus, and add that onerous but precious “quia ego quae placita sunt ei facio semper.”¹³ And so we pray “ad invicem.”¹⁴ Sister Rosa has promised the Lord not to write or to read any more letters. Naturally obedience intervenes when necessary. She suffers the angel of Satan, but she fights well.

Best wishes for the approaching advent of Love. Bless me and believe in my deep appreciation and gratitude, in Jesus and Mary.
Your very humble servant,

Sister Maria Pia

5. To her Mother

Grottaferrata, December 29, 1935

Praised be Jesus Christ who with his precious blood has saved us all.

Dearest Mamma,

With this I want to give you the news that, thank God, I am enjoying excellent health. The Lord’s house is a haven of peace and love, and I am doing fine here. I thank him always for

¹¹ A Magdalene Sister, known in religion as Sister Rosa.

¹² is always with me

¹³ for I do always those things that please him

¹⁴ for each other

having called me to himself and especially for having placed me in this house located far away from the world and its pitfalls.

You thank him, too, Mother, because I am not able to do it sufficiently, and pray always, so that he will quickly allow me to become a bride who is worthy of him, and tell him to make me suffer death a hundred times rather than leave these holy walls where I was greeted with so much love. I for my part do not fail to pray for you every day, and for all the family, for our relatives and benefactors, and, finally for our homeland and for the whole world.

Our mission is to pray always for friends and benefactors as well as enemies, and we will not fail to do so, hoping that the Lord will deign to answer our prayers.

Not having been able to write for Christmas, I do so for the New Year. As this new year begins, may the Lord fill you with his heavenly blessings and grant you and the others in the family the grace that you need for your temporal life and eternal salvation. Remember to call upon him, and he will certainly hear you.

Now I will let you know how we spent our Christmas. On Christmas Eve we go to bed at 5:00 p.m. I seem to hear you laugh and say, "too soon." We got up at 9:00 p.m. and we sang until eleven-thirty, but don't think that they were just carols: we were singing the psalms. Then at midnight we started the Mass of the Infant Jesus, also sung, and in this Mass Communion was distributed. Think about it, receiving the Lord before 1:00 a.m., and tell me if that doesn't seem better than having a feast with a lamb and roasted sausages as you do in Dorgali. After Mass we sang again and then went to take another little rest. In the morning we heard five more Masses.

Does it seem like too much? It was Christmas day, and we had to honor the Child Jesus who, for our sake, on this day deigned to descend from heaven to this miserable earth and lay in a manger in a stable. Let us meditate on this sublime lesson. He who is Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth,

humbled himself so much, yet we, his miserable creatures, do not want to recognize our nothingness and our unworthiness. My dear ones, let us promise the Lord to recognize him, and at least from now on, to repair, as far as we can, the evil we have committed ourselves and all the sins that are committed in this world, which are very numerous.

And now, please let me know how you spent Christmas day. Let me know if you had the parish mission as expected and if it appears that Billia and Salvatore went to confession.¹⁵ I would also like to know if the sodalities and religious participation of the faithful are going well and if our village has suffered considerably from the departure of Father Meloni.

As for me, I would like you to know everything about our life so that you'll have some idea, but you know that it's impossible to do it all at once, so I'll write a little at a time, and then you will be happier.

I send you this picture of the Queenship of Mary; Reverend Mother gave two of these to each of us. Pray these prayers so that soon this liturgical feast will be instituted.

My warmest regards to you all, Mamma, brother, sister, and family; say hello in my name to my neighbors and family, greet all my friends, and tell Maria Fancello to send my season's greetings to the *signorina* and all the sisters of our circle.

Happy New Year and greetings once again in Jesus.

Your daughter,
Sister Gabriella

Greetings to Grandma Michela and tell me if she is healed.

¹⁵ Gabriella continued to worry about the spiritual life of her brother and brother-in-law. She did not stop asking for news about them at home until her last days.

31. To Mother M. Pia Gullini

May 3, 1938

Dearest and Reverend Mother,

Yesterday the good Father Chaplain came to see me and brought me your dear letter. Thank you very much for what you have done for me, and please thank all the people who are concerned about me. May the Lord reward you all abundantly in heaven. I am very sorry that I displeased you with my letter. I don't want to apologize so many times, but only ask forgiveness with all my heart.

Last Sunday, as I told Father, they examined my sputum and it was found positive. I had placed all my hope in this exam, so you understand what pain this news has caused me.

The first day I suffered very much. Then, last night, I felt a great strength infused into my heart, and I resigned myself fully to the will of God, accepting to suffer for his glory and not to endanger my sisters.

I assure you that my sacrifice is entirely complete, because from dawn until late at night I don't do anything except totally renounce my will, my aspirations, my desires, and everything that is in me, whether holy or defective.³⁷

Previously there was no way to bend my heart; now I truly understand that the glory of God and being a victim does not mean to do great things; rather it consists in the total sacrifice of oneself. Pray for me, that I will increasingly understand the great gift of the cross and that from now on it will benefit me and all the others.

I feel that now you love me more and that also my heart increases in my love for you. In this regard I suffered a lot both from the devil, who tempted me to judge my superiors as heartless for leaving me here, and also from other people who

³⁷ The invitation for the Octave of Prayer of Paul Couturier of January 1938 reads, among other things, "The prayer of a Christian is so much more effective for union when the person is close to God that is, stripped of self."

make the same accusation. I certainly did not hesitate to drive out these temptations, and I assure you that I won. I say this with filial simplicity, and if I could show you my heart like an open book, I would be happy to do so.

The Lord keeps me naked on the cross, and I have no other consolation than to know that I suffer in order to fulfill God's will in a spirit of obedience.

It seems at times that my head is so confused: when I start the rosary I go on to say the chaplet of mercy. I begin that, and then I find myself doing prayers for the dead, and so on, and then I say with the psalmist, "I was like a beast before you. Nevertheless I am continually with you."

Today I inform you that they will take me to the section of the hospital where Sister Serafina is, but I don't know yet if they will keep me with her. I didn't want to go there, because the Reverend Father Abbot and Father Chaplain told me that I should have gone somewhere else, and that this change was not necessary, but the order came, and I just submitted. As you see, for the moment the Lord does not give you the consolation of my return, nor do I know if he will give me the grace to return to the monastery.

If you agree, please send me at least the breviary, because they haven't given me any work; so by saying the Office I'll spend the time more piously. I don't need anything else now. If I am going to be transferred elsewhere, I'll let you know what I need.

Reverend Mother, you asked me to pray for you during these days. You may be sure that I do, because my only consolation is to pray as well as I can. I could not finish this letter in the common room, so I do it in another wing of the sanatorium.

I was put in a small room with a Franciscan nun who seems very good. Here I am much better than in the common room, and I thank the Lord for this. I do not know if it will be convenient to change my room again, but as the Lord gives you the grace to see further than I can, Reverend Mother, do what you think is best.

I feel certain that gradually as the result of resignation, a great peace enters me. . . . Tomorrow and the day after I will offer my day for you, praying to the Lord to bless and sanctify you more and more so that you can sanctify the others. I commend myself to your prayers, in which I put all my hope.

I greet you with the most filial affection, and I embrace you wholeheartedly.

Your daughter,
Sister Maria Gabriella

Bless me. . . . The leaflets that you sent me have done good to those who read them in the common room. I hope that the effect lasts!

32. To Mother M. Pia Gullini

May 10, 1938

Dearest Reverend Mother,

Yesterday I received your package and your letter and I thank you for everything. I understand your decision about my return; I know you do everything for my greater good, but I don't hide the fact that this was painful for me. If I had been told eight days ago that I had to stay here for the cure, I would have been resigned, and it wouldn't have bothered me so much. But after Father Abbot told me and repeated again on Saturday that I could return to the monastery this week, I felt invaded by a great joy; therefore this shock was terribly hard for me, because I am in a state of great physical weakness.

The wound³⁸ has reopened and bleeds again as at the beginning, and it has made a deep furrow in my heart. Be patient! I tell myself. The Lord also gave me this test to add to the others that will follow, because I am sure that this will not be the only one. If he wishes it, after the first moment of anguish, every-

³⁸ *morale*: Italian ed.

thing will come back in place as before, and his will shall be fulfilled.

When I left, Reverend Mother, you said that if I had to stay, it would be at most for a few weeks; but it's been a month, and who knows how long I'll still be here. I hope at least you don't have the intention of keeping me out too long.

Now that I am back in the midst of the world, I feel more than ever the greatness of the gift of a vocation, especially for our way of life and how we must make the most of it. Pray for me: when you are used to living the Trappist spirituality it demands a great resignation and great faith to endure a life extremely contrary to ours and full of moral humiliation. For consecrated souls it is very painful to be at the mercy of everyone.

The doctor is full of respect for me, but that does not detract from my repugnance. I am always afraid of losing my religious spirit. So I stay here and do not leave my room except to go to church. Some tell me I'm too reserved, that I should relax while being out of the monastery. I don't mind what they say, but I feel that if I were to do that, my spirit would feel more pain instead of being lifted up. Nothing can give me relief, except the thought of doing the will of God and obedience to the superiors.

Concerning the religious sister who is with me, she is very good, and we get along because she also has a tendency to solitude. Sometimes our ideas do not agree, but we do fine just the same. . . . She is absolutely against my leaving here, saying that if it is the will of the superiors, I must do what they say, and so I should not wish to return to the monastery without having finished the treatment, because in the monastery I could not have the injections and special meals as in the hospital. To all this I replied that I would be much happier to live closed up in a well in the monastery than live here with all the care and comfort desirable. . . .

We go to bed at nine, but for eight days I have woken up at one or two o'clock: a sore throat and cough impede my breathing and prevent me from sleeping. During the day I go to bed,

but I don't sleep; for two or three days the food has nauseated me, and I also have a fever.

Always your daughter, who only wants to return to your embrace,

Sister Maria Gabriella

I profited from *The Imitation of Christ* chapter 37 of Book III.³⁹

33. To Mother M. Pia Gullini

Sunday, May 22, 1938

Dearest Reverend Mother,

Thank you very much for your dear letter and for what you sent me, which I received this morning. Thank you for your good words and good advice.

For a long time I have been convinced that I am only a pygmy in the way of the spirit, because I get carried about with every wind that blows. My soul is here like one lost, because it doesn't have its mother⁴⁰ or a friend whom it can ask for advice when it feels the need. It seems to me that the Lord does not want me to have human consolations.

When I am left quiet, I resign myself to thinking about the Lord, and his will, trying to overcome opposing temptations. But if someone, thinking to do me good, approaches me to tell me something for my relief or comfort, my heart aches and my eyes fill with tears. I even feel ashamed to say that, but how can I hide it? I would like to be strong, strong as iron, and to the contrary I feel as weak as a straw. It's also a test from the Lord that these thoughts, which I would like to keep far away, always come back persistently.

³⁹ Chapter 37 of the third book of Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* is entitled, "Pure and Entire Resignation of Self to Obtain Freedom of Heart."

⁴⁰ the abbess: parenthetical insertion by the Italian editor.

Yesterday Reverend Father Abbot came and spoke with the doctor, who told him that it is not possible to reduce the therapy to every fifteen days, but in a month it will be possible to reduce it to every eight days, then after seven or eight months, to intervals of fifteen days. I cannot ask that you take me back now that the treatment must be done every five or six days, but, in any case, I hope that I won't be kept here for seven or eight months.

I'm also upset about the idea that the community must spend thirty-five lire per day, as I've heard. The Lord, who sees all and knows all, will consider this too so that the community doesn't have to suffer through my fault.

My dear Mother, pray much that I don't lose my religious spirit. That's my one great fear, my biggest fear, because I feel so weak and able to fall at any moment.

The Lord will help me, because he never abandons those who put all their confidence in him. I also expect the help of your prayers.

The fever stopped for two or three days but resumed last night, and this evening I still have a slight fever. I think that it must be the effect of the treatment. I realized that the distaste for food comes from fever.

These rose leaves were blessed and distributed at the Mass of Saint Rita. If you want to keep them, disinfect them, because I touched them with my hands.

Grottaferrata, June 23, 1938

*My good Mrs. Sagheddu,*⁴¹

The Lord, who so honored and privileged you in asking your daughter to make her his bride, now seems to hasten the wedding.

Dear good lady, let me explain: Sister Maria Gabriella, who has always enjoyed excellent health, began to turn pale after a cold, but

⁴¹ To the mother of Gabriella: note by the Italian editor.

the doctor said it was nothing. But that change of color impressed me, and I arranged another visit. The doctor found a bit of phlegm and said that it seemed of no importance, but to be sure I wanted a radiograph. I asked the sisters to accompany her to the hospital, and the doctors examining her there were of the same opinion as our doctor. Nevertheless, the results of the radiograph showed a slight haze in the right lung.

It was decided to treat it right away with pneumothorax in a sanatorium, which the doctors claimed would lead to a complete and immediate recovery. Instead, the pneumothorax had the opposite outcome as, unfortunately, often happens, and since she begged to come back, I gave her permission. It was for me a great sorrow, because your daughter is among the best, and I love her very much because of her great virtue.

However, knowing that Sister Maria Gabriella had offered herself to the Lord for one of the noblest causes, to hasten the union among the dissident churches, I realized that the Lord has accepted the offer.

She herself told me, "since the day I offered myself I haven't felt very well." This was at the end of January, but we did not realize it until April, although I had dispensed her from the Lenten fast, finding her a bit pale, as I said.

Good Lady, I know the pain caused by my saying this: I know it from the pain that I myself feel. But with the eyes of faith, see that your daughter is ready for the upcoming heavenly and divine nuptials and weep like a mother who cries when an earthly husband asks for your daughter and takes her to his country. They are tears, but I would say tears of joy thinking about the happiness of the daughter.

Now I am certain that Sister Maria Gabriella is happy: she is quiet, serene, and deeply content. The doctor says, "It may be that she will recover." But I do not believe so; if the Lord calls, it does not matter how robust her constitution is. We forced her to eat as much as she could. But she cannot tolerate meat any more, or cheese, or bread. She still takes a lot of milk and four eggs, but all this is only for the sake of obeying—and fruit also—although she does not have any appetite.

Dear good Lady, although your daughter does not want me to tell you this, in order not to make you suffer, I wanted to warn you. But

do not grieve like those who have no faith. I dare say that your daughter is an excellent religious, now that I see the sentiments with which she suffers. I dare to say she is a holy religious: the sisters of the novitiate envy her admirable disposition.

How many more months will this sickness last? It is God's secret.

Do not worry, because your daughter lacks nothing, and if you write to her, do it like a mother worthy of such a daughter.

*With religious affection,
Sister Maria Pia*

34. To her Mother

Grottaferrata, July 6, 1938
Praise to Jesus and Mary!

Dearest Mamma,

I was very happy to hear your response to the letter of Reverend Mother. I was convinced in fact that your heart would not refuse this last sacrifice. I know that an outburst would be only natural, and you would feel the need to cry, but after the first few moments you would throw everything into the heart of Jesus like a blazing furnace that consumes everything. As for my health, I will not deceive you with a false hope of recovery. Instead of making me well, the care that was given to me at the sanatorium has hastened the sickness, because when I came back from the treatments I was almost always worse. I don't want you to worry at all praying for my healing; rather, pray that the Lord does in me what is for his greater glory. I am happy to be able to suffer something for the love of Jesus. My joy becomes great when I think that the time of the true wedding approaches.

The Lord, as you know, has always favored me with special graces, but now with this disease he has done something greater than all the others. I have totally abandoned myself into the hands of the Lord, and I have gained so much.

I feel that I love my Spouse with all my heart, but I want to love him even more. I want to love for those who do not love, for those who despise him, for those who offend him. In short, my desire is nothing other than love. People in the world say we are egoists who lock ourselves up in a convent and only think of ourselves. That is false. We live a life of continual sacrifice to the point of immolation for the salvation of souls. What joy on the day when these miserable snares of the body will dissolve and I can go to contemplate face to face the Heavenly Bridegroom. My happiness is so great, and no one can take it away. And it is greater than that enjoyed by the rich in their palaces, because perhaps even as they enjoy themselves, they have death in their hearts.

There is no greater happiness than to be able to suffer something for the love of Jesus and the salvation of souls. You too be happy, Mother, and thank the Lord for this great grace that he has given to you and me.

The Lord took from your home this little flower of the field and transplanted it in the cloister, and now he wants to transport it to the gardens of heaven. Be glad and contented, Mother and family, because I am happy, and I also want you to be.

I cannot forget any of you, for that would be failing in my duty. When the news of my passing reaches you, don't respond in the nonsensical way typical of Dorgali, closing yourselves up for prolonged weeping; rather bless and thank the Lord, and the next day go to Communion and say a prayer for me. When I am up there, I'll intercede for you, and the Lord who is so good will console you in your pain and will send his heavenly blessings upon you.

Don't think that I am not being taken care of; indeed everybody gives me so much attention. Reverend Mother is so good that she doesn't spare any effort and tries in every possible way to bring relief. She comes every day to the infirmary to visit me, which is a great sacrifice for her, because we are more than fifty nuns and she must attend to all of us. No maternal heart could surpass the love and attention that she shows me.

Pray much for her: she has a right to your prayers because she sacrifices so much for me.

And now, Mamma, I ask forgiveness for all the failures and offenses that I may have caused while I was with you, and I also ask for forgiveness from all the family and from my aunt. From you, my Mother, I await your blessing. I ask you to pray for me that I may bear peacefully all the suffering that the Lord may be pleased to send me. Be resigned and rejoice in the Lord. Do not remain oppressed by pain but be happy, as I told you, and bless God for all that he does.

Remember me to the rest of the family and all our relatives.

I embrace you in the Heart of Jesus.

Your daughter
Sister Maria Gabriella

I send you this photograph, which I don't need any more.

Grottaferrata, July 9, 1938

Good and dear Mrs. Sagheddu,

I have just received your second letter, and for three days I have had here a letter from Sister Maria Gabriella, but I did not find time until now to write a note to accompany it.

She spent a week that was somewhat better: she had a lower fever and she slept. Perhaps that is due to the prayers of her mother! But it is not the kind of improvement that we can trust in. Moreover, she is so calm and happy! One day she told me, hearing from me that her sisters in the novitiate were praying novenas, "With all these prayers and this attention they will not let me die! Actually, I am happier to go with the Lord—but as he wishes!"

Do not worry, Madam, I will keep you informed, and if it is still possible, I will ask Sister Gabriella to write to you, although it costs her much effort.

I thank the Lord that the mother is worthy of her daughter. Pray very much for her, that the holocaust will be worthy of God. Sister

Gabriella tells me that she will try to eat some cookies in order to please you. If you wish, send a pound, but not more. Here, too, we gave them to her, but she has hardly any appetite. Thank God she still takes milk, eggs, and fruit. And the Lord permits that she is offered special things like bananas and other treats, which make her think of the delicacy of Providence.

I thank you, and I will write. Sincerely yours,

Sister Maria Pia

*Nashdom Abbey
July 15, 1938*

Reverend Mother Abbess,

My dear friend, the Reverend Couturier of Lyons, has granted me the privilege of reading your letter of December 1937, in which was recounted the wonderful offering and death of Mother Immacolata.

I dare to hope that you will allow me to tell you how deeply moved I have been by all that you wrote to the Reverend Priest.

I am an Anglican priest, a member of a Benedictine community established in the Church of England; among its main tasks the community works for the reunion of Anglicans with the Roman Catholic Church. So you can understand how the immense love of Mother Immacolata struck me to the depths of my heart.

The visible acceptance of her offering by the good Lord is for your separated brothers of England a valuable encouragement to persevere in their efforts, often misunderstood and ridiculed, for the return to the fold of Peter of their Anglican brothers.

As a "body" we were torn from our Mother by the State; as a "body" we ought to and we want to return to her. I asked and will ask the good Mother Immacolata to pray for us.

She who is now in Christ certainly will not disdain the cry of hearts who want to reach the fullness of the Unity that he came to bring.

May I ask you and your community for some small token of your union of prayer with our community in your work for reunion? An image or a medal that belonged to Mother Immacolata would be a

real treasure for us and a sign that she embraces us with her great charity.

It will not be long before I will speak about her life and her death to the Anglican religious sisters entrusted to my care. May her example inspire many souls to imitate her offering. In fact, is it not by means of such offerings, combined with the merits of the passion of Christ, that we will see fulfilled the visible unity of all Christians in one body under one head?

Please accept my most humble religious respects.

*Your humble servant in Christ,
Benedict Ley*

35. To Father Basilio Meloni

Grottaferrata, July 15, 1938

Dear Reverend Father,

I always remember you and the good that you have done for me, so I consider it my duty to write a final word of thanks and express to you once more my gratitude. I beg you not to look too much at my handwriting, because my hand goes a bit on its own. The Lord has permitted me to contract a disease (Reverend Mother will explain), which I hope will lead me to the eternal nuptials.

Therefore I would like to show my gratitude once again. Thank you so much, Reverend Father, for caring for my spirit from its first awakening to the true life, and for leading it on the way that the Lord inspired, which has always been fruitful to my soul. Thank you for having shown such careful attention for my vocation and for having fortified it for the ordeals of life since it was first born.

Oh, my vocation! If my dream came true, I feel a great part of it is due to you who concerned yourself so much with it, even with my family. If I am in this blessed shelter, seeking the Lord, certainly I owe everything to you. My heart overflows with gratitude, but words are too poor to express what is felt

Autograph Notebooks of Mother Pia Gullini

1953

Responses to Gaston Zananiri's questions¹

✠ JM

August 13–18, 1953

Dear Sir:

Finally I have finished. Be so kind as to excuse my delay. I have before me your good and very kind letters, and I'll try to answer them. The books that Maria Gabriella possessed include one on Saint Mary Magdalen of Pazzi; that is a biography that was rather complete and was part of the novitiate library. There was also a book by Saint Alphonsus Liguori, *The True Bride of Jesus Christ*, which is always read by beginners because of its strength, clarity, and emphasis on doctrine, illustrated by many examples. It consists of two volumes, neither of which is large.

The passage of Ruysbroeck that had made an impression on her I found as a quotation in a book in the infirmary—which, I do not know. These books, after being used by the

¹ Or "Autograph Quinternions," to quote literally from the Italian. In response to questions asked by Gaston Zananiri, who was writing the first French biography of Sr. Maria Gabriella, M. Pia made notes on these quinternions—booklets made up of five pages folded in half. These are today in the Vitorchiano Archives.

young tuberculosis patient, were burned or relegated to a box in the attic of the infirmary.

If the author of the two biographies did not speak of them at length, it means either that they were not worth mentioning or that the books had already been destroyed. You must keep in mind that the biography was written, or at least begun, four or five months after the death of Sister Maria Gabriella and written on the spot by a novice already well known as a writer, and especially as a hagiographer, who came from a Benedictine monastery and had already practiced the Benedictine Rule, which is also that of Cîteaux. Each chapter was submitted to me, and I can assure you that I looked at it carefully for the sake of moral "truth." Several small details are not in the documents because the novice would come to me, question me on this or that point, and have the friends from Sr. Gabriella's village recount—before me—this or that particular thing that they had retained in their memory. Then, in the spirit of a person practicing her profession, she picked up the various nuances so that she could draw a true-to-life portrait with the tangible assistance of God. For that young girl, Sr. Maria Gabriella, passed by smiling, but talking very little, so that, without the "fragrances" and the "writer sent by God," she would have been forgotten, or else everything would have been said about her in ten pages.

This is to say that the two biographies have caught everything "live" whether it was from the general ambience or from the witnesses themselves.

Now after thirteen years, we can mention some passages from letters that for the sake of prudence were omitted at that time. But as a portrait of Sister Maria Gabriella, one can only reproduce that from the two biographies.

I just finished re-reading them—for you—or rather I read them for the first time, because after reviewing and correcting the original (both of them) with conscientious severity, I didn't want to read the two printed books. I didn't review the drafts, and I realize now that several inaccuracies were introduced.

Reading them between yesterday and today I find my little daughter as she was, alive, really herself, and I took note of the passages that give us a photographic image of her true character in order to copy them for you and in order to respond to your questions of today with what I said then.

May God help you as he helped Miss Maria Giovanna Dore, who had entered the Trappist monastery with the intention of not writing any more and then, by obedience, wrote on a theme—the union of Christians—that she knew much better than I, having several times heard Cardinal Lavitrano, archbishop of Palermo, the great apostle of Unity, who died six or seven years ago.² She wrote a book that has had six editions, not counting the two Paoline editions.

Her other books have reached only the second and third editions.

Some knowledgeable people have told me that the short biography (the Paoline edition) was a better portrait of Sister Maria Gabriella, because the author had deepened her personal knowledge of her.

Daily Timetable. The timetable that you are asking about has not changed. I will write separately about the schedule and also about her nutrition.

Work. The nature of the work is as follows. The young, according to their strength, work in vegetable gardens, where the toughest jobs are done by one or two workers, helped at that time by a donkey and now by a mule. Especially in spring there is transplanting and weeding, in summer, fruit picking, and in autumn, the harvest. When Sr. Maria Gabriella speaks of digging it was small plots of land where they continually “alternate” a legume and salad patch. Although the “hard” work would not last more than an hour or two, with small stops to rest, this is not to say that for those young people who were not used to it, it wasn’t fatiguing. The other work of the

² 2 August 1950

time was sewing and other needs of the large family that constituted the community: cleaning, laundry, etc. In winter the “proficient” dedicated themselves to embroidery or painting. Sr. Maria Gabriella found it remarkably easy to succeed in everything. In the infirmary, under the guidance of Mother Michela, she made two heads of the Madonna, or rather two medallions (about fifteen centimeters in diameter) with the head of the Madonna, which could not be distinguished from those made by Mother Michela.

Numbers (in the community): Then there were around fifty, perhaps fifty-three or fifty-four, of which at any given time there were sixteen in the novitiate, but some of them left, and their place was taken by others who were entering.

Nationality: All Italian, with the exception of an elderly French nun, who died fifteen days before Sr. M. Gabriella. Between six and eight in the novitiate were from Sardinia.

Her appearance: She was beautiful, but her modesty hid her like a veil, even before entering. In the monastery, with eyes so often lowered and her head slightly leaning forward, she didn’t attract attention to herself at all.

Her stature was slightly above average. She arrived when she was twenty-one years and six months of age; she died at twenty-five years and one month. Broad forehead and beautiful, bright large eyes with a deep expression and so transparent that when she came to see me, I had the impression of seeing her soul. She said hardly anything, but her total gift, her docility, absolute and deliberate, her calm personal equilibrium, humble gratitude, and affection, pure and filial: all this you could read in her eyes. And it could be read so well that I myself could not find anything to say, or very little.

Personal recollection: In this regard I remember that while I was making the annual retreat at the end of October 1938, a time when the superior does not speak to the community, I saw her go into the choir for the visit to the Blessed Sacrament, while the community was at work. I remembered that day, October 31, the eve of All Saints’ Day, and in 1937 it was the

feast of Christ the King, so it was the anniversary of her profession. There was a custom for the young nuns who wanted to, to go to Reverend Mother on the anniversary of their profession and renew their vows.³ The little one (Sr. Gabriella) had been in the infirmary for five months. Reverend Mother called her and went out, motioning her to follow her. Sister Maria Gabriella was glad. She repeated the formula of the vows with her hands in the hands of the abbess; she received the ritual embrace with the answer, "God reward thee with everlasting life." She didn't say a word, but her beautiful bright eyes and her wonderfully charming smile expressed her joy and gratitude. Mother looked for a holy card and gave it to her, without herself saying a word, either, and watched her walk away, so simple, humble, and yet dignified. She [the abbess] was astonished and edified by this silence, which caused her to admire once again the deep Cistercian spirit that revealed itself more with actions than with words.

Her mouth was rather large, but her smile had a sweetness, a stunning beauty that revealed her teeth, white and straight, which manifested youth and health. The chin was broad and very strong-willed. Hers was a classic profile, and sometimes my eyes, a bit artistic, left me in admiration. I seemed to see again the plaster sculpture model that I had to copy during my student years, when I was young.

The portrait: I will give you here an explanation concerning the portrait of her profile, from which you will discern a sign of Providence.

A few months before her death, an illustrated booklet of one of the monasteries of our Order arrived.

I passed this on to Mother Tecla, the mistress of novices, who found the head of a monk—with his hood up—whose profile was exactly the same as that of Sr. Maria Gabriella. She showed this illustration to the novices, who confirmed the

³ In this narrative and occasionally below M. Pia refers to herself in the third person, as *Reverend Mother*.

accuracy of her observation. Then taking that picture she went to visit little Sister Maria Gabriella as she used to do every day (since the young professed sisters remain for two or three years in the novitiate), announcing, "Sister Maria Gabriella, here is your portrait." She looked at it for a moment, shook her head, smiling, submissive, and silent. The Mistress showed it to me, but I didn't give it much attention. Then, before her death when the family begged to have a photograph of her, I was embarrassed. The good Father Chaplain (nearly seventy years old), who had recently arrived, offered to satisfy that desire. It was ten or twelve days before the death of Sr. M. Gabriella.

So we made her sit on an armchair, and doing his best with a machine that he was not familiar with, he snapped, five or six poses I believe. It was a complete failure: there was only one in which the eyes of the dying person were quite well photographed, while the nose and mouth, blurred, were impossible. Nobody could send it to the family, but it was given to a friend of the monastery, the wife of the famous painter and sculptor Biagini. She made a large oil painting, larger than life, but only the eyes were similar. First a large reproduction was made and later a smaller one. But the sisters, her companions in the novitiate (including some from her own village) absolutely refused to recognize it, and the same thing happened in her village from her family and friends.

When in 1940 the biography was published, they immediately asked for a photo. The good Mother Tecla (the Novice Mistress) repeated to me many times that I had to take advantage of the offer that Providence had sent us in advance with the portrait from the brochure. But I felt a strong aversion, and I was almost invincible about that way of proceeding, which didn't seem like the truth. Furthermore, my embarrassment increased because of their continuous insistence. One night—I was alone and praying—I took the much-discussed portrait of the young monk with downcast eyes under his hood. I cut the tip of the hood with a scissors and with a pencil I drew the forehead: Sister Gabriella was there, full of life and natural. I was very moved—and I gave in. I surrendered to God.

I sent for Ms. Biagini; I explained it to her and asked her to complete the portrait with veil and wimple. Then I went to the parlor myself (to pose as a model). The lady (Ms. Biagini) did it with talent and kindness: that is the reason that you see in this picture the face that is a photograph and the rest that is painted in watercolor, a modern genre. We reproduced the portrait. In the village, the mother and family members recognized it and were happy. The companions of her novitiate breathed a sigh of relief: "Now that is Gabriella!" But I was still saddened by something that didn't seem to me to be perfectly right.

But God himself, who is Truth, in his generosity, had provided.

Defects: It was she (or her friend) who told me the defects of her youth. In the monastery I have never heard a complaint about her or even a well-deserved reproach.

After her death, when I asked for testimonies, I remember having read of two infractions of the Rule being stressed—only two. First, she made a sign to her former sub-mistress in the novitiate as they brought out the winter blankets to the sun, and shaking them, she indicated hers, which she had woven herself. It was a kind of hand weaving typical of Sardinia. It was a useless communication according to our strict rules of silence. I think she thought it was a good way to form a relationship as the inferior with her former sub-mistress.

The second: waiting her turn near the confessional a month before her death. One of her companions, from her village, passed by: she was the one who had entered the monastery first and made the monastery known to the others. Sr. Maria Gabriella made the sign for *thank you* in a grateful and touching way. The other knew very well that she was thanking her for having opened to her, from the human perspective, the way to the monastery. Here we have another small material infraction of silence, but made necessary by gratitude! I say this to let you know her great fidelity.

Two more exceptions: Once only I reproached her severely because, despite my encouraging words, she continued to

insist that she had performed her function as *invitatrix* poorly; later my words had an indelible impression of grace in her, practical and effective.

While she was in the hospital, by means of my letters, I used to complain to her maternally but strongly so that she would overcome her repugnance (the true and right supernatural motive of which I was unaware). That is all the negative elements that have been noted about her. The rest is a unanimous praise for her fidelity, which was the fidelity of love.

The splendor of these souls (Mother Gabriella and Mother Michela), which seemed quite natural while they were alive—I'm quoting the thought of Mother Tecla, which is also my thought—that splendor was appreciated in all its value only afterwards, by measuring the difference with their novitiate companions, who were also good, and then making the comparison that necessarily resulted.

Her consistency: Sister Maria Gabriella was coherent with herself. Her intelligence, her integrity, and especially her balance brought her to this naturally. On this point, her love drove her to virtue. With her even pace, dignity, and continuity, she was moving upward without ever voluntarily looking back, especially in the great trial of the hospital.

Love made her understand the necessity of this path of always going forward; it was that which constituted an aid to her strong will and her just and righteous reason, and gave her that quality of simplicity that one admired without even knowing why. *Bene omnia fecit.*⁴ But, since one should always act in this way, all of this was natural. She was the first to consider it natural. God wanted to allow her to catch the attention of others, with her "fragrances."

About some quotations: Pages 149–52 of the Morcelliana edition:⁵

⁴ "He did all things well," Mark 7:37

⁵ Maria Giovanna Dore, *Dalla Trappa per l'Unità della Chiesa: Suor Maria Gabriella (1914–1939)*, foreword by Igino Giordani (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1940).

On page 149 of the Morcelliana edition there are quotations of dialogues; the second line is called "scrawls in pencil." This is what it is: about twenty days before her death I allowed her novitiate companions to meet her and greet her individually, one after the other. I was in the room, on the sidelines, in front of a table with a magazine under my eyes, listening without letting it be known. Soon I was struck by the wisdom of the words pronounced slowly and with effort by Sr. Maria Gabriella. I wanted to preserve them, but I had only one magazine and a pencil that I had in my pocket. Then, in the white margins, I scribbled hastily, in a disorderly and barely legible fashion. Sr. M. Gabriella knew how to find for each person a word "ad hoc" so that one could say it was inspired! It was especially so when I heard what she said to a novice who was very stubborn in her own "good" ideas: "For me, when the superiors say something, *it would be impossible for me to think differently.*" Inside of me, I had a deep feeling, full of admiration: "Ah, holiness is just this!" I remember that time with the same vivid impression. Notice the word *think* and consider it in the context of her very strong personality, her former stubbornness, and her fastidiousness.

The Offering: You ask me if the holocaust of one's very life is a Cistercian tradition. I believe it is a need for every generous soul, especially those in the cloister. We have nothing else but ourselves; we have given everything. By our vows we gave ourselves in the normal way; now we would like to place a greater emphasis on the offering, adding to it a meaning of suffering, consummation, and the renunciation of life, with the acceptance of a premature death.

Published works: The two most notable, the only complete ones, are the biographies published by Morcelliana and the Edizioni Paoline.⁶ A student of Propaganda Fide, who had come to visit the tomb, perhaps in 1942, published a short

⁶ Maria Giovanna Dore, *Suor Maria Gabriella della Trappa di Grottaferrata: Amore e sacrificio per l'unità cristiana* (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 1940).

biography in “Magyar,” the Bohemian language. In Italian, another short biography, *La Sorellina che chiama* (The Little Sister Calling), was written by a well-known author. In America, four or five years ago, a biography was composed from the two Italian biographies, entitled *That All May be One*, by another well-known writer, Madame Williamson, a Religious of the Cenacle.⁷ But I do not think it had a great a success, as on the contrary happened in Italy.

Dates mentioned incorrectly: Yes, and it’s my fault for not having carefully observed the dates.

It seems to me that, when I received the invitation brochure for the great Octave from the good Father Couturier in December 1937, in preparation for the Octave of January 1938, I wrote a letter, a long letter, dated December 1937. I remember very well the night when I wrote it. Although I was very tired, I did so to please the father, and it was as if driven by force, because I do not naturally like writing letters. The invitation was nothing extraordinary: it is certain that only the one received in 1938 for January 1939 made mention of Mother Immacolata—and at that moment the life of Mother Gabriella was already declining. Perhaps the author had seen the date “1938,” without thinking that it was referring to the following January.

What is certain is that Sr. M. Gabriella asked to offer her life in January 1938. I remember the conversation I had with her. But then I didn’t pay any attention to it at all, because, as I said above, such a “case” was not uncommon. But experience teaches the superior the need to extinguish these fires that are often ephemeral, because it is rare to find souls—balanced and consistent in what they promise. Precisely for this reason I responded coldly, looking bored (I did it on purpose!), saying, “I am not saying either yes or no; offer it to the will of God.” I thought it could be just a flame of straw, but I did not yet know this young nun. Her depth and exceptional willpower

⁷ Mary Paula Williamson, *That All May be One . . . Ut omnes unum sint* (New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1949).

proved itself only afterwards. I also remember that I had forgotten the whole incident, and that it was only at the beginning of her illness that I had to ask her, "But wasn't it you who asked me to offer your life, during the Octave for Unity?" Then I remembered it very clearly.

Hospital: I am very sorry not to be able to satisfy you. We didn't do any research; we dropped everything, because prudence required it. I was of the opinion that God would guide everything himself, in spite of me, so I pulled back somewhat. I had to keep the appropriate balance between pressure from both inside and outside, and our superiors in the Order were unhappy about the story of the fragrances, and they were quite against it.

All this would have already come to the surface four years ago—if I'm not mistaken—if the diocesan process had begun, because the auxiliary bishop of Frascati, urged by the bishop of Nuoro, had given permission for it.

Instead nothing has been done: our Order doesn't hurry much. It takes miracles or a push to come from the outside.

For this same reason, namely that one couldn't foresee the future, I have no record or memory of my letters to Sr. Maria Gabriella, who could have torn them up herself on her return from the hospital. Only in one case, due to Providence, I kept hers, but one or several have been lost. I used to keep the letters of the current year, and even older ones according to the time available to me, in order to review them and keep only the important ones. I remember trying to find them in the large pile that awaited sorting, and by that time I doubted finding them.

We kept her clothes and her linens separate. And you know where we got the idea to do this? From our separated brethren at Nashdom Abbey! But at that time we already had the scents of alarm: so I was quick to listen to them, happy in this not to follow only my personal desire.

Photographic material: I will write to Grottaferrata unless you go there to please her. If you go, you can ask for what you want.

In the Morcelliana edition, all that you will find in quotes are notes taken by me when I could and what I remembered after talks I had with my sick daughter. Or I wrote them specifically for the novice at the time, Miss Maria Giovanna, who asked for the notes and then quoted them verbatim.

Maria Giovanna Dore: She had to leave for health reasons to recover her strength in Sardinia after finishing the biography for Paoline Publications. Her bishop did not allow her to leave there. He asked her to start a Benedictine monastery in Olzai, her own village. Her father was a deputy at that time and lived in Rome. Later on, Miss M. Giovanna Dore restored the old monastery of San Magno, not far from Rome, and made a foundation on the island of Ceylon.

She calls this new small branch of the Order "The Benedictines of Unity."

She was extremely intelligent and a holy soul.

Short biography published by Edizioni Paoline. I will transcribe the passages that can be used to trace a moral portrait. But first I want to tell you that in fact it is not rare to find people naturally very well balanced and extremely independent before their "vocation," who afterwards become humble in spirit and sweet. This is because they live under the impulse of the love and the fidelity that God requires, which he rewards with infinitely great graces.

Msgr. Gay writes (I quote roughly), "Often to gain a small seed, God will waste a whole harvest." Think, then, what he does in a faithful soul, who wants and asks only for love.

Mother M. Gabriella belongs to the number of these souls. Each monastery has a few of these "favored souls," but often, almost always, it is the secret of God (and of the superior).

Every so often God takes one in his hand and raises it like a banner.

Page 35.⁸ The Reverend Mother compared her to a virgin land, drinking in the first rain and allowing it to penetrate.

⁸ Page numbers here and below refer to Dore's biography of S. Gabriella, cited above in n. 5 and mentioned by M. Pia as a "short biography published

Page 37. Once she was not easily satisfied, but now all goes well for her, because she finds in everything a hidden reality: Jesus.

Page 39. This page *very true*. Especially her gesture of bringing her hand to her chest (as in the *mea culpa* of the *confiteor*) was frequent, but ever so genuine, so simple, so charming, that it left us spellbound.

Page 44. This is also very true. Although maternal, in the beginning I was afraid that her love for me would become too strong (at the time I was about forty-two years old). I wanted this flower, so straight from the stem, not to bend the slightest bit more than necessary toward the hand that cultivated it. After her return from the hospital, I was sure of her, and our relationship became very intimate on a spiritual level.

Page 53. It's inaccurate. There is talk of February 1937—no, it's January. Note. In this regard, I would add that the article in the July *Unitas* contains many inaccuracies. Among other things: "Mother Immacolata received Extreme Unction in the Chapter Room." No. In the Chapter Room she was given first aid and was taken down to the room that she occupied, and it is there that she received Extreme Unction.

Page 79. Sr. Maria Gabriella suffered visibly for her mistakes in the ceremonies, or singing in the choir. In her relations with the novitiate or the community she put into practice, without even complaining for a moment, her deep conviction: "I don't count, I do nothing." In her own eyes, she was always the last, a very small entity. Her smile had become natural: she was always smiling. She was affectionate like a child with the abbess and mistress, and she humbly marveled at their solicitude for her. She wanted no one to see her or look after her. The passion for being disregarded was something very important for her, walking a step at a time, without wishing to follow the more difficult roads, but allowing herself to be guided. She had a thirst for oblivion and sacrifice—a continuous thirst. She

by Edizioni Paoline," to which she refers in response to Gaston Zananiri's questions.

had no demands: everything seemed free, unmerited, and priceless. She lived on gratitude (page 81). Her “thank you” was like the breath of her soul. In her rare relations with those who were in charge of her, she did not ask for anything more than to help her “to love more and more.”

Page 83. Holiness was not at all a chimeric idea or something difficult, but something very intelligent, clear, and easy. She wanted to sanctify herself by the perfect fulfillment of her duties.

Page 126. “Thank you—thank you—.” The gratitude in which she always lived expanded like an ocean into which her soul plunged and drowned. And she was never to leave it. On her lips, the words expressing this gratitude were invariably simple and modest but had the quality of the depth that animated her.

Page 130. The community, which was completely unaware of the offering she had made, wanted at all costs to maintain and heal this young nun of twenty-three years, who had never made demands on anyone. She had never caused a groan, a disagreement, or a clash; she had never made an “observation” or lacked in delicacy or humility, even with a gesture; she lavished her bright smile on all, without excluding anyone,

Page 135, at the bottom (about Mother Michela). “But she would not enter into a race for zeal and mystical flights for anything in the world. She was even reluctant to admit that such flights were to be desired.—She kept walking by staying under the wings of faith, grateful for what she had received, in love of the goodness of Jesus-God. She gave—without an excess of enthusiasm and inexhaustible in quiet admiration.”

Page 136. “We have done nothing for the good of the monastery, but we would suffer until the end of the world, and even more, isn’t it true, Sr. Maria Gabriella?” The other replied, calmly: “Yes.” She did everything with the consent of the Mother Abbess, offering herself for Unity. She judged herself as the most inept in the house; she could have left without

regrets, or harming anyone. She wanted neither to live, nor to die. "As the Lord wishes."

She did not devour or burn her way along but was patient in waiting for the end; she finished step by step, always without heroic appearances.

The Lord himself in coming to meet her would set a fire to the path that separated them.

Note to page 141. "She was averse to making herself known." She even eagerly wanted to be forgotten, left aside, and she did nothing to attract attention for the sake of making sure that we looked after her. One had to question her in order for her to talk about herself. This modesty sprang from her love: she wanted to be entirely for Jesus, to be his alone. She had to be entirely free for him, to do anything he wanted. She kept herself jealously for him. It is I who tell you all this, wasting many words—but in all this she was extremely simple, not so much naturally, but with a simplicity that was thought out and willed.

Page 141. I return to page 141, and I copy: "She did not have any direct correspondence with the separated brethren. Thus, her offering was entirely between herself and God, and it was expressed only in suffering. The offering was not made in a written document, as usually happens, and she never felt the need to talk about it. Even when it was necessary to say how and why she was sick, to her mother and to the good confessor, for some time it was the Mother Abbess who had to take this assignment upon herself."

(I don't quite remember if I mentioned this to her mother; to her confessor, maybe, but I do not know.)

"Sister Maria Gabriella was as jealous of her charity as of her virginity: she had the same lily-like modesty."

Page 142. One cannot think of an interior life simpler than hers. No ascetic feats, nor did she make efforts to place herself in this or that degree of prayer; no baggage of devotions (supplementary prayers), nor of practical additions to the Mass and the Divine Office.

Note: She used to say the rosary and was very fond of the Stations of the Cross, which were placed in the corridor of the infirmary. In all things she has her place among the great ascetic figures and mystical personages of her Order, the Order of Cîteaux, and the Trappists in particular. The monastery for her was simply Jesus, his love, his will, and his glory. She was his disciple and his bride, imitating the Blessed Virgin Mary, who welcomed Jesus in her womb, responding to the Angel of the Annunciation: "*Ecce . . . fiat mihi.*"

Note: I wrote, "The Order of La Trappe," because here where I am (La Fille-Dieu, at Romont) they don't like the very popular name of "Trappist." They prefer the real name of the beginning of the Order, "Cistercian." In fact the Order is officially called "The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance. O.C.S.O."

Note Page 144. Her prayer. (A vision of a crucifix on two red carpets.) It happened just like that, so there was something mysterious.

Page 160. Remarkable and characteristic of her answer to my question if she didn't have anything to say to the community. Failure in the Usages for giving thanks and asking for forgiveness. But Sr. M. Gabriella was too young in the religious life and could not know this Usage.

Note about her, "What should I say?" It is the embarrassment of a person who does not think about herself. And then her two dominant sentiments: gratitude and humility, summarized in four words: "Ringrazio tanto e mi perdonino."⁹

Biography published by Morcelliana¹⁰

Page 16. The foreword is by Giordani, a holy man, simple and humble, a combative apologist, and a representative in Parliament. "I'm here for the love of God and of his Church. . . ." It's a beautiful passage: you can take all you wish from Giordani's preface because he is a man who is above all pettiness.

⁹ "Thank you so much, and forgive me."

¹⁰ See n. 5 above.

“ . . . those offered to love and to the passion of Christ, for the glory of his name and the benefit of the souls redeemed by Him . . . do not get distracted or waste time. At every moment, they pour out tears and prayers, vigils, and fasts into the common Treasury of the Church, for persons far away who will benefit and who on earth will not know, maybe ever, by whom they were raised up. And so their houses are centers of unending reconstruction of spiritual health for everyone, and their people are raised up as victims of atonement, between the negligences of the children and the justice of the Father: they are anvils like Catherine, their sister, by whom God’s wrath is broken.”¹¹

Page 17. “It demands a total and absolute love. It is essential to practice piety, without detours and without compromise. Above all, without weaknesses.”

Preface: from page 19 to 20. A very nice summary of the biography, from “The book narrates . . .” to the second paragraph of page 20.

Note: I think it would be good to quote this page or at least to take the ideas. Note the words, *Sister Maria Gabriella is the sister who takes you by the hand*. These words have been very successful. In Italian *sorellina*¹² is not used like the French *petite soeur* or *petites soeurs*, which is also the name of some religious institutions. In this case there is something very distinct and characteristic.

Page 40. Here we find her usual habit of gratitude, thanksgiving, and praise.

Page 42. This page is very true. It took Sr. M. Gabriella two months to conquer her faults of impatience, being demanding, critical, and stubborn. I remember well her confession. This proves her strong will power. Because in fact, when she entered the monastery, the terrain of her soul was already well cleared; she soaked up the instructions she received (mainly because she had a memory that helped her a lot), so much so that I

¹¹ Unspecified, but presumably Catherine of Siena

¹² Little sister

marveled at her wisdom, which she learned from the experience of others. Her humble docility of spirit, common sense, and loyalty to grace led her in three and a half years of monastic life to the heights (of virtue).

The sense of justice and truth was very pronounced in her. I remember that during a singing practice in the novitiate, I asked for an explanation about a small incident that had happened for which I have completely forgotten the reason. A novice gave her explanation, and Sr. M. Gabriella specified everything with a clarity, a steadiness, a “justice” that struck me, and which I still remember very well with the thought that I had at that moment: “here’s one who won’t tolerate anything ambiguous!”

Page 63. This page is very true.

Page 74. At the bottom of the page: moral portrait of Mother Immacolata. Very nice.

Page 79. Second subsection, in the middle of the page. I can only repeat what I wrote then.

Page 82. The bottom of the page reveals her aim: the glory of God. Her good sense and her pure heart internalized the core of the teachings she received, the most important point, the center.

The “common” of Virgins (the majority of women religious) does not come so quickly—far from it!

Sr. Gabriella’s coherence helped her a lot with this.

Only he—Only God—therefore “not I.”

Nothing about me; otherwise, we would be two.

Page 87. The second paragraph from the bottom of the page is a passage exposing a very true moral portrait: *Ecce . . . fiat mihi*. Readiness and absence of personal self will.

Here also her consistency stands out: God, who knows everything and can do everything, brought her to surrender herself completely to him. Her concern was only to be faithful to him. Towards the end of her life, she speaks with a novice: “What, would we like to give advice to Jesus?”

Pages 89 and 90, at the bottom of the page. Here’s the answer to your question on how the offering came about: it was like that.

Page 93. It was the only resistance on her part that I remember.¹³

Note. She was shocked: she no longer had the physical strength to get up. I remember that, as the signal for work had already been given, I had to get away quickly to oversee its distribution. I left her there thunderstruck, with her hands extended toward me. Evidently it was a blow, though in itself, there was no reason to be so upset. But what hurt her most deeply was this: what she had done to displease Jesus by insisting on her own idea.

Page 94. Towards the middle of the page—up until page 95, there is a beautiful accent on Unity.

Page 120. Second paragraph—Moral portrait. Very good.

I remember hearing from someone that at the hospital they pointed out the place facing the crucifix in the room where Sr. M. Gabriella had been, and said, "There was a young Trappist sister here."

Page 126. Last paragraph: very true, in speaking of her delicacy to avoid infection.

Page 134. This history of the five lire embarrassed a monk who translated the biography into Dutch. It seemed to be a case of a "mistaken conscience." I had to write an explanation: 5 lire then (7–8 Swiss francs today [in 1953!]) was approximately the salary for a working day. A deficiency contrary to the vow of poverty was beginning there, and sometimes the virtue of poverty is injured with something very small.

Page 135. Calling it "grave sin" evidently caused confusion. In fact, the nurse, her fellow Sardinian and novitiate companion, a holy soul—who died of a cancer last December—paid it no heed.

It is an experience that I had personally and also with other sisters: that is how one becomes sensitive on the subject of

¹³ The impression she had of having done poorly at her turn as *invitatrix*. Note of Augusta Tescari, OCSO, who translated the *Réponses* from French to Italian. Henceforth in these footnotes *translator* will indicate this first phase of the translation.

poverty in the religious life, especially in the beginning. We feel we have received gratuitously even if we bring a significant dowry, so we love the house, and therefore if we cause any damage, even if minimal, it is unbearable. On the other hand, the vow of poverty is the one that we sense more than the others, whose matter is more moral.

Note on the smile of Sr. Gabriella.

It was Mother Michela who reminded me of this after the death of Sister Gabriella. In the first days after her arrival, especially when doing the laundry, she expressed exuberant gaiety. She had bursts of laughter, not loud, but frequent. It was the joy of being where she belonged, where God wanted her. This joy is something that generally occurs even today.¹⁴ By nature she was quite pensive without being sad or gloomy—oh no!—but she was sensitive to the merriment of the environment. I do not know if she received any criticism about the frequent laughter, or if there was a general rebuke about such in the novitiate, as happens when you do not want to cause pain,¹⁵ but the fact is that I remember Sr. M. Gabriella became very serious and that the smile which was an appropriate gesture—acquired for virtue—after the reprimand received about her attitude was sometimes too serious and grim.

Page 175. Another inaccuracy. Every Cistercian monastery should have its own cemetery within the enclosure. At Grotta we couldn't have one because the property was too small to allow a proper site for the cemetery, a free area of a radius at least two hundred meters as required by hygienic law in Italy.

However our crypt—very beautiful—was separated from the crypt tombs of the parish only by means of a wall (it was the tomb of the family of those who had built the parish church). And there was even a very decent room, contiguous to this family tomb and separate from the crypt by means of

¹⁴ Among postulants [translator's note]

¹⁵ To an individual [translator's note]

a wall. I wanted very much to get permission to transform this room into a tomb, crypt tombs for the community, especially as our common grave in the cemetery was almost full. Mother Immacolata was the last to go out of the enclosure.¹⁶ We prayed. Before Easter we finally got permission for “temporary storage” (which is still valid).¹⁷ I passed by the nurse to give her the news: “We have permission for the tombs.” M. Michela and the good, elderly mother, who would die fifteen days before Sr. M. Gabriella, were ecstatic with joy. Sr. Maria Gabriella whispered, calmly, but with eyes beaming, “Now I can die.” She was the second to occupy the tomb, and Mother Michela, who departed just three months later—on July 23—was the third.

Clarification: Somewhere in the Italian press, in the articles that were published in large numbers after the biography, it was written that Sr. M. Gabriella had offered herself for the Anglicans. No. God allowed relations with Nashdom Abbey for his purposes and, practically speaking, to give more importance to the history of Sr. Maria Gabriella. But she gave her life for Christ’s desire that *all* may be one.

For you. Dom Benedict, a holy monk, came to Grotta in 1947 (verify the dates!), if I’m not mistaken, with a Benedictine oblate of his abbey, sixty-four years old, I believe, who was formerly the Governor of Nigeria, Br. Francis de Sales, who spoke French perfectly. Dom Benedict speaks it quite well. To make you understand the greatness of spirit of Dom Benedict, just how great that soul was, I will quote these words. During his visit, I told him that the doubt about the validity of ordination must be painful for him. He turned pale, and after a moment replied, “If I were certain of not being a priest, I would die of sorrow.” They were taken to Castel Gandolfo and granted a small special audience with the Holy Father. Dom Benedict, kneeling before him, said, “I have offered my life for

¹⁶ For burial

¹⁷ In 1953

Unity like Sr. Maria Gabriella." Returning from the papal audience they were so excited that they couldn't speak.

Last year the oblate became a Catholic. All this is *for you* and your friends, not for the public.

I remember something. I'm not sure if it happened after the Extreme Unction or after the Communion of Viaticum, but I think it was after the Extreme Unction. With a graceful air, but with authority Sr. M. Gabriella said, "And now, everything goes." And good Sr. Benedetta, the nurse, who had known her in the novitiate (about fifteen years older than Sr. Gabriella, she had entered at thirty-four), in order to please Sr. Gabriella, had to take her clothing away along with some books that were for her personal use.

She wanted to leave poor, bare, with nothing: "everything goes!" I remember this because it made us smile. But we understood.

I do not know if this incident is in the biography: I have not seen it, but it could be that I passed over it without noticing it.

Her struggle to accept death.

It was Donna Maria Giovanna who told me that there had been a battle and that it stood out clearly in the letters.

As for me, I had not noticed it at all. She never expressed regret, didn't ask me to help her in the struggle, and didn't admit any repugnance to me.

However, I remember that I was struck by a phrase that Sr. M. Gabriella uttered, as though talking to herself. Here's the drift of it:

At a certain moment, in the infirmary, the father chaplain spoke to us about a person, "a healer," who cured tuberculosis patients and had done wonders in a sanatorium. Mother Michela, who knew the chagrin I felt and who realized that I would very much miss both herself and Sr. Gabriella, remained for a few days under the influence of this impression, this hope. Then it all fell apart by itself, without the father chaplain speaking about it anymore; it was one of those baseless enthusiasms of public opinion!

But I remember that Sr. M. Gabriella told me something with a strange expression that struck me: "Mother Michela does not say anything more about that . . . she had to resign herself—" and did not finish the phrase. Now recalling what Miss Maria Giovanna said to me, I understand that she intuited in her companion the struggle for life, the battle between desire and repulsion through which she herself had also passed. This is a battle that she overcame alone, with her strong will and the help of grace, to which she was so faithful—.

Her docility, her abandonment came—it seems to me—because she intuited the greatness of God, and, without analyzing her feelings, she lived in the concrete adoration of the God who had chosen her and loved her. She felt so unworthy, so small, so nothing: this stemmed from her humility and gratitude.

This is what I think I understood from rereading the biographies.

The Daily Schedule

I will send you the booklet that is sent from here (La Fille-Dieu) for those who ask for information about our life, called "The Cistercian Abbey of La Fille-Dieu, founded in 1263."

The timetable is written very clearly in this brochure.



I'll send another brochure together with that one, "The Cistercian Religious. . . ."

It is already thirty-five years old, but it might still interest you, because we do not change things very much!

The diet is based on dairy products, vegetables, pasta, and rice, fruit, or jam, as the final dish is served only at noon, except during Lent and Fridays outside Paschal time, or in the evening, during the time of fasting. Everything is taken with bread and the drink of the local region. From Easter to Pentecost, in the evening we have dairy products, cheese or something

similar. Eggs are allowed as a supplement for those who need it. Meat or fish is served in the infirmary.



Let me copy for you (because it is practical and because I really like it) this thought of Msgr. Gay in one of his “Elevations”:

Living in universal love and destroying within us and around us—insofar as possible—all that is opposed to the Union of all people in the One, we fulfill the prayer that Christ made to his Father, and we are linked to the welcome, and to the effectiveness, that the Father gives to his Son.

Conclusion

Here you are, Dear Sir: that is all I can say. I ask you to excuse the disorder and language. May God help you because you write for him, for the great desire of the heart of his Son. He is himself grateful!

Humbly and with deep gratitude,
Sr. Maria Pia, OCSO

My most respectful homage to Monsignor Dumont.

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Contributors

Mariella Carpinello, a scholar of history and monastic spirituality, is the editor of the Italian edition of the *Letters of Blessed Maria Gabriella* and author of the Introduction to this volume. She teaches at the Institute of Theology of Consecrated Life, Pontifical Lateran University-Claretianum. She is on the editorial staff of the reviews *Studia Monastica*, *L'Ulivo*, and *Nuova Cîteaux*. She has published the following: *Benedetto da Norcia* (Milan: Rusconi, 1991, translated into Spanish as *Libere donne di Dio* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997); translated into French and Portuguese as *Brigida di Svezia* (Casale Monferrato: Edizioni Piemonte, 2000); and *Il monachesimo femminile* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002). She has also published extensively in collaboration with other authors. She founded the association *Lettere Dal Monastero* to promote studies on female monasticism, and in 2007 she offered a course on the history of female monasticism at the Pontifical University of Sant'Anselmo in Rome.

David P. Lavich, OCSO, entered the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance at Saint Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, in 1987, after completing twelve years of missionary work in Japan. After solemn profession he was called to serve as chaplain to the Trappistine nuns in Nasu, Japan, to facilitate international meetings of the Order as an interpreter, and to preach retreats in various Asian monasteries. After serving in Rome as a councilor to the abbot general from 2008 until 2017, he has returned as chaplain to the Japanese nuns.

Maria Paola Santachiara, OCSO, entered Abbadia San Giuseppe, Vitorchiano, Viterbo, Italy, on October 7, 1969, and was its prioress from 1978 to 1988 and from 1991 to 2003. She is presently instructor archivist and was Vice Postulatrix of the Cause for the Canonization of Bl. Maria Gabriella until 2013.

Mark A. Scott, OCSO, entered the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance at Our Lady of New Clairvaux Abbey, Vina, CA, in 1978. It was there that he composed this article. He was subsequently abbot of Assumption Abbey, Ava, Missouri, and is now abbot of New Melleray Abbey, Peosta, Iowa. Between those two stints in the abbatial service Fr. Mark was for five years editor of *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* and executive editor of Cistercian Publications.