The mother of saint Victor

A woman for life, freedom and charity.

Her origins

Sister Enrichetta Alfieri -Maria Angela Domenica -was born in Borgo Verceil, in Italy, on the 23rd
February, 1891, by John and Rose Compagnone. She is their first daughter who will be followed by another two sisters Angela and Adele and a brother Charles.

Maria is carefully educated by her deeply christian parents; she lives her childhood by attending an elementary school; during her adolescence she spends her time doing either housework or working in the fields, as it was common in those days; besides she becomes an expert in art and embroidery; thus she forms a character which is at once gentle and strong.

When she was about 17 years old, she thinks of religious life but her parents invite her to reflect and to wait. These years strengthen her decision to give herself totally to God.

On the 2nd December, 1911, the twenty year old Maria, enters as postulant in the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity in the Monastery «Santa Margherita» in Vercelli.

The Superiors see in Sr. Enrichetta a strong inclination to education: on the 12th July 1917, she receives the Authorisation Diploma in Elementary School Teaching.
Afterwards, she is sent as educator in the Kindergarten School « More » in Vercelli. Only a few months later, she is obliged to leave the school because of health problems.

Having been transferred to the Provincial House of Vercelli, the seriousness of her disease isn't diagnosed immediately.

In April 1920, she is accompanied to Milan to for thorough treatment and special tests, but without big results. A serious disease is finally diagnosed: it's a degenerating spondylitis.

She is sent to the infirmary of the Provincial House of Vercelli and her condition continues to deteriorate. In fact she is immobilised and in great pain for more than three years.

As from this moment, the life of Sr.Enrichetta appears strongly marked by suffering which she herself considers as Jesus' privilege on her behalf, hence rendering her similar to him: « If by vocation we are established on the Calvary, by illness we are on the Cross with Jesus – we read in her notes – The bed must be considered as the sacrifice altar on which we must immolate ourselves and let ourselves be immolated like peaceful hosts and victims of love. It is therefore necessary to suffer in a holy manner for the benefit of the spirit and of virtue. Suffering is not enough; it's necessary to suffer a lot and to do so it is necessary to suffer with dignity, with love, gentleness and intensity».
In May 1922, just as they declare that her disease is incurable, Sr. Enrichetta is sent on a pilgrimage to Lourdes «in the hope, writes the provincial superior, that the young sister, this angel of gentleness, could be healed or encouraged through the Most Holy Virgin …» She comes back without being healed, but she feels the effects of the grace of the Spirit because every day she feels stronger while accepting her immolated sacrifice.

During this suffering period, the characteristic features of her spirituality emerge: participation in the Passion of Christ through the Cross; fidelity in Love; serene self-surrender to God's Will manifested by her constant smile and by the simplicity with which she lives the Calvary's experience. «The true religious, when faced by the Cross or penetrated by the sword, always answers with a smile» she writes in her notes.

In January 1923, the doctor who visits Sr. Enrichetta declares that she is about to die. On the 25th February, day of the ninth apparition of Our Lady of Lourdes, at 8 o'clock, while the community was hearing the Sunday mass, Sr. Enrichetta, destroyed by the utter sufferings, makes a great effort and drinks a drop of water of Lourdes. After a brief fainting, she hears a voice telling her: «Get up». She gets up immediately as she is free from pain and paralysis. She writes: «…The good heavenly Mother made me reappear miraculously from death to life. Feeling of: gratitude, marvel, disappointment. The doors of Heaven are closed, those of life are opened up again».

There is big joy and wonder on behalf of the sisters in front of the extraordinary event. The consulted doctors declare the clinical healing and acknowledge the impossibility to give an explanation. While her health conditions improve, the Superiors, to avoid encouraging the increase of the enthusiastic religious manifestations occurring in the city due to this miraculous event, send Sr. Enrichetta to the detention House of Saint Victor in Milan.
Thanks to her attractive bounty, Sr. Enrichetta gets closer to those who suffer and seek a word of peace and support. She alone obtains the permission to enter the cell of a particularly difficult by suffering and interiorly more united with God she can start afresh her work in Prison and women who had joined the Social Republic of Mussolini. Now that she is more mature, purified return to Saint Victor, where she resumes her mission of Sister of Charity among the new. When the tornado was over, after her liberation, on the 7th of May 1945, Sister Enrichetta can continue with my apostolate of an Italian and Catholic Sister of Charity, through prayer and the expectation while she prays incessantly, happy to share the destiny of many brothers while aware that she did her duty as an Italian Sister of Charity. Put in an isolated cell in the detention Home, Sr. Enrichetta spends days of frightening sufferings, Lord, have mercy of our poor world, of our dear native land which today is destroyed, and from her heart came forth this beautiful prayer: «charity is a fire which likes to expand while it burns; I will suffer; I will work and I will pray to draw souls to Jesus». Thus, the long apprenticeship of charity begins. The young religious exerts gentleness and burns; I will suffer; I will work and I will pray to draw souls to Jesus. Her gentle, direct and firm look, her serene face, her calm and convincing word, her moderate and good gestures give her an immediate and communicative ability, penetrated by humanity, sustained by an intensive life of prayer, by a constant union with God and a strong experience of community life, her personality is delineated gradually, fascinating, authoritative and capable of living freely, outside which were intercepted by chance, for persons in danger, so that they might escape, in front of the Virgin of Lourdes, every evening Sr. Enrichetta likes to gather small groups of women for a service, seem to be more numerous: in fact, they are everywhere, in the corridors, in the cells, towards the end of 1939, Sr. Enrichetta is appointed Superior of the Community of the Sisters of Charity. Her presence and her word bring about order and serenity in the inevitable tense situations, her entrance in the detention Home is marked by faith and by a fervent desire to participate in the difficult mission entrusted to her. Limited due to the very high walls, the very long corridors, the closed portals, the locked up doors and the many bars: yet, in this place Sr. Enrichetta will be capable to live freely, the victorious light of darkness in front of the Virgin of Lourdes, the prison's corridors Sr. Enrichetta and the inmates, Sr. Enrichetta, with her sisters, is the first to defend the victims, to help and sustain them by the Germans are in charge of the detention House like a concentration camp; it becomes the place of police-interrogations, of physical and moral tortures, of condemnations and departures to the extermination camps. Love triumphs over hatred.
Blessed Enrichetta Alfieri: her life

Extracts from the memories written by Sr. Enrichetta

The meeting with her Lord

In September 1950, she falls down in the Cathedral square and breaks her femur. She manages to recover but only for a little time. Seriously ill due to bad liver functioning, her heart is highly tired and after thirteen days of agony she is ready to meet the Lord. After receiving the Sacraments to which she participates with full lucidity, she says with an edifying serenity: «I didn’t believe it was so nice to die».

It is 3 o'clock in the afternoon, Friday 23rd November 1951.

The news of her death is immediately diffused via radio and the press. Her corpse, displayed in the burial chapel becomes the object of touching manifestations of love; the inmates want to see once more, «the Angel of Saint Victor».

Her funeral rites, celebrated in the Basilica of Saint Victor, were the consecration and the triumph of virtue and Charity. Among the crowd assembled for the ceremony, participated numerous sisters, civil and ecclesiastic authorities and a very big number of people.

The parish priest, Mgr Dell’Acqua put this inscription of the church facade: «Within the sad walls where one atoned and in the dark cells where, during the tragic hours of the Homeland, one paid for having loved freedom and Italy, put to the test for decades, she used to pass like an angel, cried like a mother, silent and daily heroism. In a fervent prayer, like a burning flame which was later extinguished, this was Sr. Enrichetta Maria Alfieri, a true Sister of Charity.»

by Sr Wandamaria Clerici and Sr Maria Guglielma Saibene