

Blessed Maria Karłowska

Born 4 September 1865, Stupowka (now Karowo) Poland

Died 23 March 1935, Pniewite, Poland

A professional dressmaker, Maria was visiting the sick at night when she encountered prostitutes for the first time. Many of these women suffered from syphilis, which was potentially fatal and, if left untreated, progressed to paralysis and dementia. (There was no cure until the introduction of penicillin). They were scorned by society when they were healthy and abandoned when they became ill, yet Maria understood that even the most hardened among them could be saved.

This work took her from the venereal disease wards of charity hospitals to secret brothels unknown to everyone, even the police. In 1884 she opened her first House of the Good Shepherd, a refuge for women who wanted to change their lives. Her zeal attracted disciples with whom she founded the Sisters of the Good Shepherd of Divine Providence (Good Shepherd Sisters) and a rehabilitation program based on charity, mercy, and prayer. No one was ever forced to participate in religious exercises because, Maria said, *"Every religious practice is a free act."* She urged her Sisters to discover each woman's abilities and help her to fulfill them. Many of the women went on to become wives and mothers. Others remained with the Sister, assisting in their mission. In 1928, the Polish government recognised Maria Karłowska's service to her country with the Cross of Gold. She is venerated in Poland on 23 March.

The Genius of Maria Karłowska:

At Maria's beatification, Pope John Paul II cited her Feminine Genius, *"revealed in deep sensitivity to human suffering, in tact, openness and readiness to help, and in other qualities proper to the feminine heart. Often this is shown without drawing attention to itself and therefore is sometimes undervalued...How much this 'feminine genius' is needed, that today's world may preserve respect for human dignity!"*

Reflection:

"Yet even now," says the LORD, / return to me with your whole heart, / with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; / Rent your hearts, not your garments, / and return to the LORD, your God. / For gracious and merciful is he, / slow to anger, rich in kindness / and relenting in punishment."

Joel 2.12-13

From Gallick, Sarah, The Big Book of Women Saints, p. 100