

Christian saints somewhat remote and shadowy figures. Margaret Sinclair may well be one of the first to achieve the title of Saint from the factory floor.'



Margaret Sinclair

(1900-1925)



by

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A VERY ORDINARY GIRL

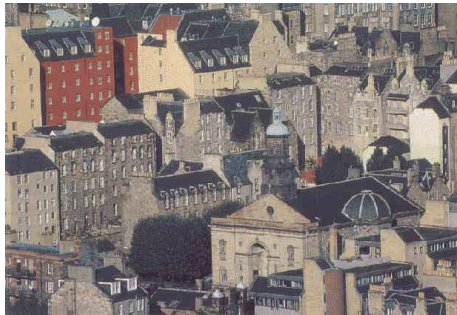
Margaret Sinclair was born on 29 March 1900 in the basement flat of a run-down Edinburgh tenement—24 Middle Arthur Place—the third child of a dustman, employed by the city Corporation. The area was grimy and dilapidated and the hazy air, reeking of smoke, echoed with the wandering cries of ragged children and the listless clip-clop of carthorses.

Margaret died only twenty five years later. But even in her brief life her exceptional spiritual qualities had attracted attention, and after death her fame quickly spread. The Cardinal Archbishop of St Andrews & Edinburgh, who had attended every session of a thorough-going 'apostolic process' to decide whether or not her holiness should be publicly acknowledged, and who had heard all the witnesses, would write that 'the picture left in my mind was of a young woman of strong character, really alive, active and inspiring...an attractive person.' The official Roman decree of 6 February 1978 spoke of her as 'a miraculous example of evangelical perfection' and of 'outstanding examples of the virtues.'

Yet hers was an ordinary life and unlike that of many saints and holy people help up for our devotion we can imagine what she was like. She is near to us in time and place. The only difference is that she was Christian to an extraordinary degree.

CHILDHOOD

Shortly after Margaret's birth, the family move to 13 Blackfriars Street, a tenement no more cheerful than the one she had been born in, close to the parish church of St Patrick.



*St Patrick's Church
Edinburgh:*
where Margaret was
baptised and confirmed

Our Lady too, though seeing was not with the eyes of the body.

Her extraordinary fortitude impressed itself on all the people who saw her during her seven months of illness. A Jesuit priest was struck by her 'childlike innocence and constant happiness under the most painful circumstances, and her extraordinary devotion and reverence in receiving communion.' He added, 'She used to close her eyes and join her hands in the same way an innocent child would, who was vividly conscious of his presence.'

In August, Margaret made a general confession and the priest was hardly able to restrain tears of joy. 'She was a beautiful character,' he recalled. 'the simple, charming spiritual beauty of her soul and face haunts my memory.'

On 24 November 1925, Margaret went to her eternal reward, her last words being, 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul.' Her body was taken back to the Poor Clares Convent for the funeral and she was buried in Kensal Green, North-West London. But her fame spread rapidly all over the world and as the number of cures and favours attributed to her intercession poured in, she became known as the 'Edinburgh Wonder Worker' and her coffin was taken and reburied in Mount Vernon Cemetery, Liberton Edinburgh.

In 1930 Fr Agius wrote to Pope Pius XI, enclosing books and other writings about Margaret Sinclair. The reply, dated 10 January, calls her 'that very bright little flower of Christian virtue' and expressed the hope that her example would be imitated by those who read about her.

The informative Process of Inquiry into her virtues was held in Edinburgh in August and September 1930 and the evidence sent to Rome. Nine years later, the Holy See approved Margaret's writings and in 1942, Pope Pius XII signed the Introduction of her Cause into the Sacred Congregation of Rites. Margaret was declared 'Venerable' by Pope Paul VI in 1978. The final words of the decree, issued on 6 February, ran: 'It is established in the case under examination that the servant of God, Mary Francis of the Five Wounds, possessed the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity towards God and her neighbour, and the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude...to a heroic degree.'

His Eminence Cardinal Gordon Gray, Archbishop of St Andrews & Edinburgh, aptly summed up the significance of her life by saying: 'We can still admire the heroism of the early martyrs, but the unlikelihood of our being thrown to the lions makes these first

at the convent, said later that he was much impressed by her radiant appearance: 'She looked so guileless, simple, sincere, unaffected, docile and humble. This impression was antecedent to what I have since heard from her sisters in religion regarding her saintly patience during her stay in the Sanatorium at Warley. The impression was as lasting as it was instantaneous...

'I certainly think it rather remarkable that a man of my years [I am now in my seventy-second year], who is not all impressionable, should be so wonderfully impressed. For we priests meet many saintly souls without our being particularly arrested. Sister Francis, however, had a personality which made one feel that he was in the presence of unexampled candour of soul.'

ILLNESS AND DEATH

Early in 1925, she developed a persistent cough and fever and lost weight rapidly. The doctor diagnosed tuberculosis of the throat and she was moved to a sanatorium run by the Sisters of Charity, Marillac House, Warley in Essex.

Though fully aware of the gravity of her illness, Margaret radiated such steadfast joy and serenity in the midst of suffering that the nursing staff were entranced. Even when in great pain she managed to summon up a smile. 'One could never find out her likes and dislikes,' admired one of her nurses. 'She said everyone was too kind to her.' Another nurse recalled, 'Sister Mary Francis suffered from prostrating weakness, from constant breathlessness and choking in her throat, and from loneliness, being outside her dear convent...'

Once, after a day of excruciating pain, she gave a courageous smile and stammered, 'Oh, this has been a glorious day—a day of suffering. If I could only save one soul for Jesus, it would be worth it all.' On another occasion, as she lay gasping, a wasp flew into her throat, and stung her. Despite the blinding pain, Margaret literally forced herself to smile. 'It is the will of the good God,' she managed, 'and another wee bit of the cross.'

The sister in charge was fascinated by her indomitable serenity. 'I could not take my eyes off her,' she testified later. 'She kept smiling—I thought at some heavenly vision. After a little while I said, 'Sister Mary Francis, are you smiling at the angels?' She answered in her calm, reserved way: "Perhaps". To her spiritual director, she admitted that she had seen Our Lord looking 'very sad' and

She attended the nearby Catholic school of St Anne and proved herself a quiet, well behaved pupil, working hard and gaining prizes in running and swimming. Her natural cheerfulness and habitual smile became the sunshine of the Sinclair home. She would act as the peacemaker between her more volatile sisters, Bella and little Lizzie. When she spoke, it was often on spiritual matters. 'Margaret is so wise and silent,' observed her mother at the time. 'She never speaks outside of what she has seen and done at home.'



St Anne's Parish School Edinburgh:
as it was then, and as it is now as a Community Centre

Every morning, even in winter, she went to mass and communion barefooted and thinly clad, a clear sign of the family's real poverty. At home, she helped her mother with housework, sewing and mending, and made it her business to cheer her father up, coaxing him to smile, filling his pipe, and warming fresh dry clothing when he came home chilled on wet winter evenings.

The Sinclair home was a happy one. Andrew, the father, was proud of his family and spent a good deal of time with them. He had never been to school himself but was determined that his children, six of them, should receive an education. Elizabeth [Libby], the mother, brought up this good-sized brood with great devotion under circumstances that were far from ideal.

Many years later, Bella, by then herself a nun, would remember Margaret's outstanding characteristics to have been her patience and gentleness. 'She seemed to think out situations in the home in advance. It was this oversight of hers that helped smooth over so many difficulties encountered in our hard early life.'

When her mother was depressed, Margaret would urge:

'Dinna, give in.' One trying evening, Mrs Sinclair suddenly broke down and sobbed that she would go no further. Margaret gently stroked her hair and urged her to seek comfort in confession and communion. 'And what's the use of going and then starting again?' her mother wailed, staring despondently at the blank wall. 'Try again mother,' Margaret smiled encouragingly. 'I'll say a wee prayer for you.' This irrepressible cheerful faith could move mountains—which is what the family's problems must often enough appeared to be.

Each evening, after family rosary, Margaret would climb the stairs to her sparsely furnished, spotlessly clean room with its colourful display of holy pictures on the wall, and pray before her little shrine which she had carefully laid out on a narrow ledge by her bed.

TEENAGER

Meanwhile, at school, Margaret had gained the certificate which she needed to attend the Atholl Crescent High School of Domestic Economy, where she was awarded further certificates in sewing, cooking and dressmaking. Like any ordinary teenager, she enjoyed dancing, parties and dressing in the latest fashion, but when she returned home late, she always recited the rosary by her bed—even when she was very tired. 'Well, I enjoyed myself very well,' she would say to Bella, 'now I must give God his share. Look at us dancing and enjoying ourselves and yet how many religious Orders were up praying for us, and how many souls God has called home during that time.'

Early in life, Margaret had to master a tendency to be proud-spirited and to speak her mind. She learnt to hold her tongue when necessary, to check a hasty word and to leave the room when anyone was annoyed, returning only when they had calmed down. When she had a temptation, she would repeat the name of Jesus ten times, very slowly, and the temptation would disappear.

During her last year at high school, Margaret took a part time job as a messenger for a local business firm to help provide for the two younger children in the family. Of the little money she did not hand over almost all went to the missions or to the beggars in the streets. As she grew older, she modelled her life on the *Little Way of St Therese of Lisieux*. She read the Gospels, the *Imitation of Christ* and the lives of the saints over and over again. The eucha-

and obedient even unto the death of the cross. I will practice charity in my words and ever look out for little opportunities to perfect this beautiful virtue in helping my sisters, especially in those things that are contrary to my nature. I will endeavour to be diligent always and try to do all things well and ever have a pure intention in what I do...'



New room shrine next to the altar

Every day, she went out on begging expeditions, visiting offices and firms in West London and the homes of the wealthy. Such work inevitably exposed her to many rebuffs and tested her humility to the full. She maintained her characteristic simplicity and irresistible smile in all situations, making a profound impression on all who met her. 'your life as a Poor Clare must be very hard,' a friend wrote. 'Are you never hungry?' 'Yes,' Margaret replied, 'but it is real happiness.' A year later, Mother Abbess could only write of her, 'Sister Mary Francis is admirable. She wants nothing but the will of God.'

On the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, 11 February 1924, Margaret was clothed in the special habit of her Congregation, with her parents and Bella there to watch. On 14 February 1925, she was allowed to take temporary vows. As she crossed the chapel to receive her crown from Mother Abbess, everyone noticed how she turned to the tabernacle with a 'heavenly' smile. This time none of her family were present; perhaps because her father had been killed in an accident late the previous year.

The extern sisters were rarely allowed to enter the enclosed part of the convent, but one of Margaret's letters home describes such an occasion—Mother Abbess' Profession Feast. Margaret wrote of her surprise that some of the sisters had never seen a car or a bicycle, even thought they were living in London. She called them 'these dear old saints living their life of penance and prayer all with such happiness.'

Fr Alexander, a Scottish Franciscan who met her a few times

me.' Shortly after, he was buried alive in a pit by falling debris but escaped without injury, aware that 'she was praying for me in her convent.'

THE NUN

This episode helped to focus an idea which had been forming in Margaret's mind.

The call of god was now clear and unmistakable; early in 1922, Margaret confided to Fr Agius that she wished to be a nun—preferably in the Order of the Poor Clares. 'I just want to suffer with our Lord,' she explained with simple candour. The priest questioned her closely, spelling out the rigorous life of a Poor Clare—scant food, night vigils and severe penances. 'Does this frighten you?' he ended. Undeterred, Margaret responded, 'With God's help, it will be all right.' The priest pursed his lips noncommittally, for she looked anything but robust. But in the end he accepted her sincerity and recommended the Poor Clare Convent at Liberton, Edinburgh. She applied to the Mother Abbess, asking to be admitted as an extern sister—the humblest role in the convent as extern sisters perform all the essential chores that leave the enclosed choir nuns free to pursue a life of contemplative prayer.

There was no vacancy for her at Liberton, and she was directed to apply to the Poor Clare Colletines in Cornwall Road, Notting Hill, London, who accepted her. [The convent moved in 1970 to Barnet, North London; the original buildings have now been demolished.]

On 21 July 1923, a month after Bella had joined the Little Sister of the Poor in Edinburgh, Margaret took the train to London, accompanied by her elder brother, Andrew, who was emigrating to Canada. The following morning, after mass, she said goodbye to Andrew for the last time and was received as a postulant. She was named Sister Mary Francis of the Five Wounds.

She was now a long way from home and among people with unfamiliar accents. But she adapted to the hard life with relative ease. She was no stranger to austerities. Besides her earlier mortifications, she had worn a wooden cross studded with sharp tacks on her back for some years. Her life as an extern sister was filled with the uneventful day-to-day activities of convent life. 'I will be submissive in all things,' she wrote in her spiritual notes 'having always before me that my Lord, my God, was ever submissive to St Joseph

rist became the centre of her life. Each morning found Margaret in the church porch, shivering in winter, waiting for the door to open. Her communion thanksgiving lasted long after mass had ended and on arriving home she went up to her room for some time to pray and meditate. She loved the Forty Hours devotion. Andrew Sinclair would sometimes take his family on picnics and outings and they would make a point of stopping in at churches where this devotion was in progress.

LIFE IN THE WORKING WORLD

After she left school in 1914, Margaret took a full time job in the Waverley Cabinet Works as a French polisher and became an active trade union member. Her work was arduous, the hours being from eight in the morning until six in the evening, and inevitably brought her into contact with the coarser side of life. To fortify her spirit and sanctify her difficult work-day, she continued to attend mass and receive communion each morning before going on to the factory at eight. As this was in the years before the relaxation of the fasting rule, it meant that she generally worked all day without nourishment of any kind, her lunch hours being spent before the Blessed Sacrament in St Peter's or St Cuthbert's in Slateford.

St Cuthbert's Church Edinburgh:
where Margaret visited the Blessed
Sacrament during lunch hours



Margaret's quiet diligence won the admiration of her employers. She was never seen wasting her time and the manager at the last factory where she worked valued her so much that he later pleaded with her not to leave when he learnt that she was thinking of entering a convent.

Though outwardly like her workmates, Margaret's tactful silence in the midst of ribald talk earned her sardonic sneers and laughter. On one occasion, a joiner approached Margaret to tell her an indecent story, but seeing her gaze remaining fixed on her work, he finally withdrew—embarrassed and ashamed. A few days later

he tried again, but her attention remained glued to her job. Seeing her prayer book and rosary lying beside her, he turned away and advised his colleagues to leave her alone 'for she is a holy girl.'

When Margaret was seventeen, she spent a memorable summer holiday with Bella at Rosewell, near Edinburgh. There, Margaret persuaded her sister to go to daily mass and communion. When Bella protested that she wasn't good enough, Margaret replied, 'You are not going to holy communion because you are good, but because you want to try to be good.'

Her prayer, ever more deep and intense, never made her dour and cheerless. She loved enjoying herself. She still went to the parish dances with her family. People remarked that the Sinclairs were such a close-knit family that where one went, they all went. She liked making clothes and gazing into the fine shops in Princess Street with Bella.

Margaret's years in the Waverley Cabinet Works coincided with those of the First World War, which brought disruption to Edinburgh and the Sinclairs. Her brother, John, was called up and her father volunteered. Both, happily, survived the war. As their part of the war effort, the girls took an allotment. Margaret won prizes for the cabbages she grew there.

Work was precarious in the years following World War I and Margaret knew the frustrations of being redundant and out of work when the factory closed down in 1918. She was lucky enough, however, to find work in McVitie's biscuit factory.

A YOUNG MAN

In 1919, while on holiday in the seaside town of Bo'ness, Margaret met a young man—a lapsed Catholic named Patrick Lynch, recently demobilised from the army. By gentle persuasion, she induced him to accompany Bella and herself to mass and Benediction and made him promise to go to confession. The young man found it impossible to resist 'a girl so full of faith' as he described her and he became of model Catholic of his period, reciting the rosary every day and becoming enrolled as a Knight of the blessed Sacrament.

He saw her regularly that year and on her next birthday presented her with a ring and asked her to be his wife. Margaret, who had no wish to marry, was distressed at the way the relationship had developed, especially since her parents were delighted at

the prospect of a wedding. She prayed in her heart, 'If it is necessary that I should make the sacrifice, I will, dear Jesus, but you will have to make me love him, for I do not.'

Finally, Margaret sought the counsel of Fr Thomas Agius, an Edinburgh Jesuit, who assured her that she was under no charitable obligation to marry the man. Greatly relieved, she wrote to him and ended the affair as gently as she could, explaining how she had long made it clear that she had only befriended him to restore him to his faith. Here is her letter:

Dear Patrick,

Time changes all things on this earth, so if you pay attention to that first line you will not think so much of the following. I must tell you that I am still of the same opinion as on Sunday [when she advised him that she was definitely going to break the engagement]. I really wish to break with it because I do not care for you. You understand when we first met it was different, because the circumstances made it so. I was rather moved by your position then, as it was not the best. I had done what God inspired me to do, to help you, the little I could, to regain the Light. From that moment God and his Blessed Mother must have showered down their blessing on you, because you have remained steadfast since. And I trust in God that you will continue doing so, because you know he is the only real happiness...You will recollect a year ago I wrote a similar letter to this, but when you came, you implored me not to. I must be rather chicken-hearted because I agreed, but I feel I *cannot* let it go any longer. Perhaps you will be hurt at my saying this, but if you take a broad view, you will see it is better now than after.

From

Margaret Sinclair

P.S. I do not wish a reply.

Years later, the man testified, 'I never dared to use the least familiarity with her. She was a holy girl; she made a new man of