

## BLESSED IMELDA—PATRONESS OF FIRST COMMUNICANTS

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SINCE the pontificate of Pius X, the Pope of the Eucharist, it has been the practice of the universal Church to admit children to the Banquet of Love, for the first time, as soon as they have come to the age of reason. He, who granted this privilege to the youthful souls of his spiritual flock, with equal paternal solicitude has appointed as patroness of first communicants, Blessed Imelda Lambertini, because of her Eucharistic devotion and her miraculous First Communion.

Although history has not preserved the exact date for us, we know that "The Little Saint of the Blessed Sacrament" was born at Bologna, Italy, in the early part of the year 1322. Through her father, Egeno Lambertini, Captain General of her natal city and Guard of the Castle and Fort of Ocellino, she was numbered among the illustrious Lambertini family of Bologna, "from which proceeded a long line of great men noted for their nobleness of soul, their uprightness in peace and their valor in war, since they acquired many honors and distinctions for themselves and their city."<sup>1</sup> In addition to Blessed Imelda, the Lambertini family gave to the Church, Blessed Joan, companion of St. Catherine of Vegri, and Pope Benedict XIV, who was Prosper Lambertini and one of the foremost canonists of all times.<sup>2</sup> A study of her maternal genealogy shows to us Castora Galluzzi, a woman with the culture, sweetness and generosity of the Bolognese and famed for her piety and spirit of prayer. She was a scion of a wealthy and influential family of Bologna which likewise includes Napoleone Galluzzi, an Augustinian Friar, together with the Dominican Archbishop of Crete, Egidio Galluzzi, who had much to do with Imelda's spiritual development in her early years.

Blessed Imelda's birth was not prefigured nor accompanied by those wondrous manifestations which have heralded the nativity of

<sup>1</sup> *Acta Sanctorum* (Paris and Rome, 1866), XVI, 182.

<sup>2</sup> John Baptist Lambertini, about 1638, translated into Latin and Belgian the life of his kinswoman, Blessed Imelda, originally written in Italian by Celsus Sexaferratus, a monk. This work has received great commendation from the Bollandists in their *Acta Sanctorum*, *loc. cit.*

some chosen souls of God. But it is not surprising that the offspring of such virtuous and exemplary parentage should soon give evidence of that sanctity and Eucharistic love which were to bud, bloom and diffuse their fragrance in her childish soul. Tradition tells us that the child received in Baptism the name of Magdalen, but her gentle, amiable and angelic disposition merited for her the "pet name" of Imelda, which signifies in Italian, "sweet as honey." Thus she has been known to posterity. In her infancy she was accustomed to lisp the names of Jesus and Mary. Religious hymns and metres made popular since the time of "The Poor Man of Assisi," replaced in her childhood the traditional nursery rhymes of today. The Chant of the Church thrilled her being. She loved to recite and meditate upon the Psalms of David. She recognized in them the most efficacious and soul-stirring forms of prayer, whether it be in the supplicating strains of the Miserere, "Have mercy on us, O Lord, according to thy great mercy,"<sup>3</sup> or such verses of adoration as, "What shall I render to the Lord for all the things that he hath rendered to me?"<sup>4</sup>

When only nine years old Imelda, convinced of the sweetness of the "tabernacles of the Lord," resolved to spend the remainder of her life in the observance of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience and, accordingly, having obtained the permission of her parents, she humbly sought admission to the community of the Sisters of St. Dominic who dwelt in the Convent of St. Mary Magdalen in Val-di-Pietra, a short distance from Bologna. The members of this religious community were devoted to a life of contemplation and were part of what is known as the Second Order of St. Dominic. The Fathers and Brothers constitute the First Order. The Sisters of the Third Order are engaged in the active works of the religious life, such as, teaching and the care of the sick. There exists also what is called the Lay Third Order composed of devout members of the laity. All these taken together constitute one religious family, the Dominicans.

Blessed Imelda, her biographers are unanimous in telling us, from the very inception of her religious life embraced the austerities of the community; she was exact and regular in the observances common to the religious state and because of her grave and serious deportment "resembled more a woman of maturity than a child of such tender years."

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm L.-i.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm CXV.-12.

The chief splendor of her religious life, however, shone forth in her ardent and insatiable love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. How eagerly she longed for the joy and privilege of experiencing that intimacy which the Lord of Hosts effects in the souls of His children when He unites Himself to them in Holy Communion. When Christ instituted the Eucharist in the Cenacle on that first Holy Thursday night He did not specify at what age His followers should be permitted to receive Him for the first time. This regulation He left to the disciplinary laws which He empowered His Church to make. In the ages in which Imelda lived, the custom of the Early Church of permitting infants to receive the Eucharistic Bread and the plea of Pius X that children be admitted to the Angelic Banquet when they have reached the use of reason did not prevail. Again and again, Imelda entreated her ecclesiastical superiors to permit her to satisfy her desire to receive her Sacramental God. They, however, deemed it wiser to follow strictly the legislation of the Church then in force. In the year 1333, on the 12th of May, the Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord into Heaven,<sup>5</sup> Imelda's soul was longingly stirred as she saw her religious companions approach the altar to receive Holy Communion. When all had left the choir she remained and was more ardent than ever in her entreaties with the Divine Shepherd that He should come to feed her hungering soul. Tears of holy sorrow at her privation moistened her heaven-turned eyes. Suddenly a consecrated Host left the Tabernacle and entering the choir remained suspended in the air above the head of the youthful Spouse of Christ.<sup>6</sup> A sweet perfume drew the Sisters to the choir and as they entered they beheld the Spotless Wafer suspended in the air. They were filled with wonderment and consternation. The chaplain was summoned. He immediately recognized in the miracle the expression of the will of God. Imelda was on this day to make her First Communion. The priest, vested in surplice and stole and with the paten in his hands, approached to the place where Blessed Imelda knelt, rapt in celestial contemplation. As he arrived the Host descended to the paten. He placed the Host upon Imelda's tongue

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<sup>5</sup> As it is noted in the *Acta SS., loc. cit.*, there is a dispute whether this was the Feast of the Ascension or the Vigil of the Feast. This is due to the doubt about the exact date of Easter in that year. All authors, and the inscription on the tablet which has been erected in Blessed Imelda's honor by the Lambertini family, place the date of her miraculous First Communion and of her death on May 12th.

<sup>6</sup> T. M. Schwertner, O. P., *Blessed Imelda, Her Life and Confraternity*, p. 18.

and after he had uttered the customary words used in the distribution of Holy Communion, "*Corpus Domini Nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam*"—May the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ preserve thy soul unto life everlasting. Amen.—Imelda lowered her head in reverent thanksgiving and closed her eyes as she knelt, held captive by her Truly Present God. The Sisters withdrew to the fulfillment of their daily tasks. Imelda remained in her prayerful posture for many hours. Then her superior, fearful lest the happy child should suffer from exhaustion, came to rouse her from her thanksgiving. She touched her on the shoulder. There was no response. "The joy had been too much for mortal strength to bear. Filled with sweetness and consumed with divine love, Imelda had passed from the ecstasy of her First Communion to the bliss of Heaven."<sup>7</sup> This wonderful miracle and her death became known throughout the country round about. The memory of her beautiful life and Eucharistic death was reverently preserved among the people of Bologna. For five hundred years she was honored by them as a saint and great joy filled the hearts of her brothers and sisters in the Order of St. Dominic when on December 20, 1826, Pope Leo XII raised the little Hostage of Love to the altars with the title of Blessed and permitted the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the recitation of the Divine Office in her honor.

On May 7, 1891, at Prouille, in the Diocese of Carcassonne, in southern France, where St. Dominic six centuries earlier had established his first community of nuns, the Confraternity of a Good First Communion and of Perseverance, under the patronage of Blessed Imelda Lambertini, was inaugurated. As the title indicates, the primary object of the Confraternity is to prepare boys and girls more fittingly for the reception of their first Holy Communion, and to enable them to persevere more easily in the frequent reception of the Sacrament of the Altar. We learn from the chronicles of the Dominican Order<sup>8</sup> that adults should be admitted to the Confraternity who will instruct first communicants or who will, at least by their zeal and prayers, obtain for them from Almighty God the grace to make a fervent First Communion. The adult members should also extend their efforts to exhorting Christians to a more perfect practice of the virtues in general. They should manifest a strong devotion towards the Blessed Sacrament; they should often approach Holy Communion in reparation for the blasphemies uttered

<sup>7</sup> "The Little Saint of the Blessed Sacrament," *The Torch* IV (Sept., 1919) No. 2, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Analecta O. P.*, X (1911-12) 87.

against the Holy Eucharist and also to supply for the tepid Communions received and the sacrileges committed by those who partake of the Eucharistic Bread, conscious that they are in mortal sin. It is likewise suggested that the members make daily, at least spiritual visits to the Blessed Sacrament. The active life of the Confraternity may consist in caring for the adornment of the altar and the dissemination of literature and pamphlets, principally those concerned with Eucharistic subjects.

On August 21, 1893, the Confraternity, till that time merely a diocesan organization, was affiliated to the Dominican Order by the Most Reverend Andrew Frühwirth, then Master General. His Holiness, Leo XIII, by a pontifical brief dated May 7, 1896, erected the Confraternity of a Good First Communion and of Perseverance into an archconfraternity<sup>9</sup> at Prouille. The Diploma of Aggregation necessary to erect a branch of the Archconfraternity states, "Since the Book of Wisdom has said: 'Whosoever is a little one let him come to me' (Proverbs, IX-4), it is not to be wondered at that Holy Mother the Church has approved various associations for instilling piety into the children, and in this is showing herself to be fully conforming to the love of her Divine Founder." On September 10, 1895, Pope Leo XIII had granted to the Confraternity plenary indulgences to be gained on five occasions. To these Pius X, on January 28, 1911, added three partial indulgences that may be gained by the members of the Archconfraternity. Although the Archconfraternity had been affiliated to the Dominican Order in 1893, its supreme moderator was the Ordinary of Carcassonne. The Acts of the General Chapter of the Dominican Order, held at Rome in 1910, declared "that the Master General, the Most Reverend Hyacinth Cormier, with the consent and approbation of the Ordinary of Carcassonne, petitioned His Holiness, Pius X, that the Archconfraternity of a Good First Communion and of Perseverance under the patronage of Blessed Imelda, established in the venerable monastery at Prouille, be transferred to Rome so that, with the Master General of the Order as its supreme moderator, it may be raised to an equal footing with the other confraternities of the Order, and that branches of it may become more numerous . . . and thus

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<sup>9</sup> Confraternities or sodalities are a voluntary association of the faithful, established and guided by competent ecclesiastical authority for the promotion of special works of Christian charity or piety. Confraternities can be constituted only by a formal decree of erection. When a confraternity has received the authority to aggregate to itself confraternities erected in other localities and to communicate its advantages to them, it is called an archconfraternity.

fulfill the wishes of the Holy See in regard to the increase in frequent Communion and the admittance of children, when they have reached the age of reason, to their First Holy Communion."<sup>10</sup> A rescript of the Sacred Congregation of the Council constituting the Master General of the Dominican Order as the supreme moderator was issued on October 18, 1910. In the subsequent General Chapter of 1913 joy was expressed that many thousands had been enrolled in the Archconfraternity and also the desire that every effort would be used to further the growth of the association. The Acts of the General Chapter of the Dominican Order (Rome, 1924) mention the Archconfraternity of Blessed Imelda with the other confraternities of the Order such as The Rosary Confraternity and The Holy Name Society and it is hoped that it will attain to their universality in the Church."<sup>11</sup>

This is merely a survey of the life of Blessed Imelda Lambertini and a short account of the Archconfraternity which bears her name. It will show why she is represented in art as a child of eleven years clothed in the habit of a Dominican Nun, her arms extended in welcome and indicating that she is about to receive the Host which is represented a little above and in the distance denoting Its suspension in the air.

Pius X in a letter dated November 25, 1908, and written to the Archbishop of Bologna, the Most Reverend James della Chiesa, the future Benedict XV, most willingly declared Blessed Imelda Lambertini to be Patroness of First Communicants. He thus supplied a need on the part of the young in their devotions to God.

The relics of Blessed Imelda are preserved in the Church of St. Sigismund in Bologna. Numerous favors have been obtained by pious pilgrims and because of the devotion that has been paid to the Child of God, through a rescript of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, January 11, 1921, there was instituted a Commission for the Resumption of the Cause of Blessed Imelda. There has been submitted to juridical inquisition four great miracles, one in Italy, two in France, and one in Cuba. It is hoped that future first communicants, at an early date, will obtain through their childish prayers, for their Patroness the greatest honor that can be bestowed upon her in this world, the decree of the Vicar of Christ declaring her to be a *saint* of God.

<sup>10</sup> *Acta Capituli Generalis, O. P.*, 1910, p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> Diplomas of Aggregation to the Archconfraternity of Blessed Imelda are obtained in the United States through the Very Rev. M. J. Ripple, O. P., P. G., 884 Lexington Ave., New York City, New York.