



BLESSED IMELDA'S FIRST COMMUNION

BLESSED IMELDA—VICTIM OF LOVE

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INDFUL of the part the faithful play in the great drama of the Mass, the Church urges them to use missals that they may participate more fully in this great Sacrifice. When the faithful thus act with the celebrant and with the High Priest, Jesus Christ, then indeed is it true that they are, as St. Peter says: "A Holy Priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."¹

Through the use of the missal at Mass we learn how to live and model our lives after that of Christ. The missal is so divided that in one part, called "*De tempore*" (*according to the season*) we commemorate the entire life of Christ Himself; and in the other, entitled "*De Sanctis*," we see the life of Christ mirrored in the lives of His Saints and Blessed. Each Mass contains beautiful and inspiring lessons that teach us what we must do to attain the friendship of God.

Some of the most beautiful of these lessons are found in the prayer of the Mass of Blessed Imelda Lambertini, the sixth centenary of whose death we commemorate this year. This prayer teaches us to love Jesus more ardently, receive Him more worthily and long to be dissolved and deserve to be with Him in heaven.

"O Lord Jesus Christ who having wounded the blessed maiden Imelda with the burning love of charity and fed her wondrously with the sinless Victim, hast now welcomed her to heaven; grant at her intercession, that we may draw near this holy table with the same burning love, and long to be dissolved and deserve to be with Thee."

The first clause of the prayer "*O Lord Jesus Christ who having wounded the blessed Imelda with the burning love of charity*," tells us of God's love for His youthful spouse. A glimpse of her life will

¹ I Peter, ii, 5.

reveal the tender Hand of the One whom Francis Thompson calls the "Tremendous Lover."

Blessed Imelda Lambertini was born in Bologna, Italy. Her parents were wealthy and of the nobility. From her earliest years her youthful mind was always centered on things spiritual. She had a burning love for prayer. Her father, realizing the true piety of his daughter, built an oratory in the gardens where she spent many hours reciting parts of the Psalms and other prayers taught her by her devoted mother. As she grew older and was taken to church her mind and heart were drawn to Jesus in the Tabernacle. Her eyes would be riveted on the Tabernacle door endeavoring to pierce the veil and behold the King under the sacramental species. What beautiful and wholesome thoughts may have entered her childish mind, we can only surmise. Christ, perhaps, was feeding her with knowledge that is withheld from the wise, for He conceals great things from the wise and reveals them to little children. Thus her early years at home can be termed the preparation for the great and marvelous life and death that would be her reward for loving well.

Imelda was all God's! Her parents, realizing this, did not hesitate to give their daughter to Him when she sought entrance into the Dominican Convent of Val-di-Pietra, outside the city gates of Bologna. As a child of ten she entered the convent and donned the white habit of St. Dominic to live under the guidance of his Order. Her life in the convent was a very singular one in that she carried out the precepts of love and obedience to such perfection that she became a model for the older Sisters of the community.

Her hours of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament were moments of real happiness. With the simplicity of childhood, Imelda went straight to the source of all spirituality, Christ in the Eucharist. There was no multiplicity of devotions, no divergance from essentials. She had learned that the secret of sanctity was union with God; that there was no surer way to attain it than by loving Christ in the Eucharist. All her affection and devotion, therefore, were centered on one end, the union with her Eucharistic King through Holy Communion. To receive Him substantially into her heart, to know that her King actually dwelt in the temple of her body, was the culmination of her desires.

But Imelda had one immense cross to carry which weighed upon her heart. She was denied First Communion because she had not reached the age of twelve, the prescribed age in that diocese. Again and again she begged to be allowed to receive the Bread of Angels,

but it was refused her. The more she was refused the more humble and loving she became, offering all to Him Whom she loved with a burning love.

The second clause in her prayer commemorates a new epoch in her young life. "*O Lord Jesus Christ who having wounded the blessed maiden Imelda with the burning love of charity and fed her wondrously with the sinless Victim. . . .*"

Time after time when the Sisters had approached the altar to receive Holy Communion, Imelda had remained in her place, alone with her disappointment. But Christ had heard the pleadings of her loving heart, and was preparing for His little friend a manifestation of His love for her. It came on the Vigil of the Feast of the Ascension, May 12, 1333. Once again the Sisters approached the altar rail; once again Imelda was deprived of the joy of His presence within her heart.

When the Mass was over and the Sisters left to take up their round of daily tasks, Imelda remained in the chapel. What she said to her Eucharistic Friend and what He said to her must ever remain hidden from us. All we are told is that suddenly the entire convent was filled with a fragrant odor. Tracing it to its source, the Sisters came to the chapel. There they beheld a wondrous sight; suspended above the head of Imelda, and illuminating the entire chapel with its brilliance, was the Sacred Host. Recognizing the miraculous intervention of Divine Providence, the Sisters called the chaplain. He too saw the Hand of God in this miracle and vesting quickly, took the Host in his hand and placed it upon the tongue of Imelda.

As she bowed her head in prayerful adoration the Sisters withdrew to leave her alone with her dearest Friend. For some hours Imelda was alone in the chapel. Fearful that exhaustion would overcome the child, her superior finally attempted to arouse Imelda from her prayerful posture. There was no response. Imelda had made her thanksgiving in Heaven. When she had received the Body of her Lord she had closed her eyes to this world forever. Her little heart had broken with love; as she had so longed to receive Him upon earth she readily answered His call: "Come my love, my dove, my beautiful one."² Her spotless soul was united in perfect happiness to her Spouse for all eternity. He Who "wounded her with the burning love of charity and fed her wondrously with the sinless Victim . . . now . . . welcomed her to Heaven."

In the first half of the prayer for the feast of Blessed Imelda

² *Canticles*, ii, 10.

the Church has portrayed for us God's special predilection for her. He filled her heart with a burning love, He fed her wondrously and then took her to Himself. The last part of the prayer is for us: "*Grant at her intercession, that we may draw near this holy table with the same burning love, and long to be dissolved and deserve to be with Thee.*"

Why do we find it so hard to excite sentiments of love for God when we approach the Holy Table? We have the same faith that Imelda had in the Real Presence. Yet how different are our acts of love; how cold, how weak they seem when compared to hers. Is it because we do not meditate enough upon the Divine Liberality? Love begets love; and if we were fully awakened to the extent of God's generosity to us, if we were fully cognizant of the benefits He bestows upon us simply and solely because He loves us, then perhaps we could learn to love Him more. This is the essence of sanctity: love of God. "What differentiates us from the saints is not our nature which is the same, nor our personality which is irrelevant, but solely the difference of our love."³

God shows His goodness to us in many ways. We can see the kindness of a provident God when we consider the creation of the world, the heavens, the plants and animals—all created for man. God also looks after us through the ministration of His angels by placing over us one of His divine legionaires to guard and protect us during this time of probation against our triple enemy: the world, the flesh and the devil.

Our Redemption is another great and wonderful manifestation of the divine goodness. Through sin we were enemies of God, comparable to the devil; we were worthy of hell. But God so loved the world as to give His Only Begotten Son that He might come and offer that reparation which man of himself could never give. A Divine Person hypostatically united to the nature of man was necessary, according to the Divine Plan, to redeem the world. Yet over and above all these wondrous workings of Divine Providence, Jesus Christ, Son of God, gave Himself as food for men. Only a God could have given us so great a manifestation of love. St. Thomas sees in the words of Christ: "He that eateth my flesh . . . abideth in Me" the greatest and highest gift of Divine Goodness.⁴

In the name of Blessed Imelda we ask Almighty God to place in our hearts a real fire of love when we approach the Holy Table and

³ McReavy—*Guy de Fontgalland*—p. 171.

⁴ *Opusc. LI, Cap. v.*

receive the same Sacred Body. "We dwell in Him," says St. Augustine "when we are His members, and He dwells in us when we are His temple. But the bond whereby we are made His members is oneness; and what is the cause of oneness but love?"⁵ This love we pray for when we ask our Lord that we might "*draw near the holy table with the same burning love,*" and which the Apostle says, "is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Ghost."⁶ Our bond of love with Jesus is strengthened the more frequently we receive Him for then we are in closer relation with Him Who is All Love.

Loving Christ as we should when He takes up His abode in our hearts we must thank Him for this wonderful and salutary gift whereby we are strengthened in grace, and divinely nourished with this celestial food. Christ knew, by His divine prescience, that we would need spiritual food as well as material food. He knew that our souls would become darkened and weakened by slight offenses against His love. So He gave us, as the Council of Trent clearly states, "an antidote whereby we are delivered from daily faults, and preserved from deadly sins,"⁷ and a food that will increase grace in our souls and with grace the greatest of all the virtues, Charity. Not only will we be able to love more ardently, but we will believe more firmly and hope more assuredly that we will be among those whom Christ will "raise up in the last day."⁸ This we pray for in the last clause of the prayer: "*that we may . . . long to be dissolved and deserve to be with Thee.*"

Union with Christ for all eternity will be our salutary reward as it was with Blessed Imelda; the reward for the faithful who enkindle in their hearts a burning love for Jesus and approach His Holy Banquet frequently, for again we have the words and promise of Christ: "If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever."⁹

⁵ Homily, 27th. tract on St. John.

⁶ Rom., v., 5.

⁷ Council of Trent, Sess., xiii, c. 2.

⁸ John, vi, 55.

⁹ John, vi, 52.