



Rosa Soror Nostra

DOMINICANA

New Series

SEPTEMBER, 1917

Vol. II. No. 2

ST. ROSE—THE PATRON SAINT OF AMERICA

At the time when the Pilgrims stepped out onto Plymouth Rock there flourished in the Spanish possession of Peru a beautiful city, a Catholic city, a city that had seen the life and death of a saint. The city was Lima—and the saint who lived there was St. Rose, the Flower of the New World. She was born on April 20, 1586. In baptism she received the name Isabel. One day, however, a rose of extraordinary splendor came mysteriously and touched the cheek of the infant, and her mother, seeing in it a sign from Heaven, ever after called her Rose. She grew into a singularly beautiful and attractive child. From the beginning there was a sweet serenity about her that could be attributed to no natural cause. Although as a girl she was always reflective and a lover of solitude she was at the same time so bright and cheerful that her brothers and sisters held her the favorite.

That intense love for Our Lord's sufferings that characterizes her life seems to have been born in her. When scarcely able to walk she would steal away to gaze in contemplation upon a picture of the thorn-crowned Jesus. At three, tearless and smiling, she submitted to a painful operation on her thumb, a fact which prompted the surgeon who attended her to say years after that not in his whole career had he seen such heroism. And so it was throughout the course of her life. From childhood to death pain and suffering were always present to harass her all-too-delicate body. She bore every affliction with the same silent and happy resignation. Especially did she try to keep from others the extent of her suffering. On one occasion—she was then but a babe—when it was found that she had endured agony untold as a result of the application of a mistaken remedy to an abscess, her only reply was: "Our Lord's crown of thorns was much worse."

In her longing to be like her Divine Master she was not content passively and lovingly to put up with the extreme trials He

visited upon her, but early began to burden herself with penances. She used to creep out of bed in the night and sleep on the bare floor. Having gained the aid of the family servant, she would have a load of wood put on her shoulders and stand motionless in silent meditation until she sank exhausted under its great weight. And sometimes the reluctant servant gave way to the child's pleadings to strike and kick her, as she lay stretched on the floor, in remembrance of the humiliation of Jesus. When she was four years old she denied herself entirely the use of fruit, for which she had a particular liking. Two years later she adopted a diet of bread and water on three days of the week. The bread was stale and the water tepid. After her first Communion, she made a vow to refrain from meat absolutely, except when obedience forced it upon her.

Before she had attained her fifth year her mother took it upon herself to teach the saint to read, but before much progress had been made she grew impatient of the task and gave it up. Rose, however, asked Our Lord to teach her; and He did. The first use she made of this gift from Heaven was to study the life of St. Catherine of Siena, whom she forthwith took as a model in following Christ. Those who have written on the life of St. Rose show how well she realized her ideal.

Among the many points of resemblance in their lives was the struggle they both had to undergo against maternal preference for the married state. In childhood Rose had secretly consecrated herself to God. When she was about sixteen, her mother used to delight in taking her daughter out amongst friends. With what painful reluctance our saint yielded to her mother's demands to dress and adorn herself according to the customs of the day may well be gleaned from the fact that she always punished herself accordingly, that she might find no satisfaction in such display. On one occasion she wore a wreath that was fastened with a needle in such a manner that it penetrated deep into the flesh. She tried by increased penances to render herself ugly, rubbing her eyes with red pepper so that they became violently inflamed. On being harshly taken to task for this, she declared that she would much rather be blind than use her eyes for seeing the follies and vanities of the world. This put an end to matters of dress. Thereafter she was allowed to wear the garment of her own choice—a plain dress made of coarse material.

In spite of her strenuous efforts to keep aloof from society there were many mothers who sought her for a wife for their sons. When an offer was made that was thought most advantageous, it became necessary for her to reveal the vow taken in her childhood to have no other bridegroom but Christ. Then the entire family rose in anger against her; but entreaties, insults, even blows, could not shake her resolution.

As she advanced in years her desire to suffer, which hitherto had for its motive the longing to be "like unto Christ," increased. Her Divine Master suffered to save mankind—so would she. Her body must suffer in every way that His had suffered. She increased her fasts; she rinsed her mouth daily with gall; she wore a hair-shirt next her skin; she scourged herself to blood, and put on her brow an improvised crown of thorns. But it is a wonderful thing that such a union with God in no way dwarfed affection for her family. We see her amongst her brothers and sisters, sympathizing in their joys, never overbearing, but always trying to make the ways of holiness attractive by her bright and gentle manner, taking a goodly part in household tasks and cares. She held herself in strict obedience towards her mother, doing all she could to save her trouble. Strangers admired her for her sweetness and unselfishness, her native wit and lively conversations, as well as for her uncommon beauty.

There were two occupations that took up much of her time. She loved to embroider on silk; but it was more than a diversion, for by this means she contributed to the support of the family. People vied with one another in purchasing the work of her hands, which was of such exquisite beauty that it was generally believed that she must have received supernatural help. Then, too, she cultivated flowers to be sold in the public market. Here, also, was she especially successful, the flowers being of extraordinary beauty and frequently blooming out of season.

When it was finally understood that she could not be induced to marry, she was left to pursue her own course. Her first thought was to follow St. Catherine and become a Dominican tertiary living in the world; to stay at home and work hard; to be obedient to her parents; to renounce every earthly comfort and satisfaction; to share other people's sorrows but not their pleasures, and to devote much time to prayer and penance. At the age of twenty she received the habit of St. Dominic, but with some hesitancy, because she was anxiously sought after by all

the convents of the city. It was miraculously made known to her, however, as she prayed one day in the Rosary Chapel of St. Dominic's Church, that it was the will of God that she should keep to her first intention—so she was professed immediately.

Thinking it necessary now to give even more time than formerly to prayer and penance, she felt the need of some quiet abode where she might escape encroachments made on her precious time by frequent callers at her mother's house. She had ever loved solitude. In her childhood she had erected a little arbor where she would go to pray unnoticed. A like resort now suggested itself. But her mother would not consent to such a plan. Again finding herself in difficulty, Rose went to her favorite chapel and there asked God to show by some sign whether she should persist in her attempt to carry her point. Her prayer being answered, she called to her aid her confessor, who succeeded in getting the desired approval from her mother. With her own hands, we are told, she constructed her new hermitage—made of wood, four feet wide and five feet long, with but one window, its only furnishing a life-sized cross and such things as her work required.

Shut up in this box-like cell in a remote corner of the garden, we must picture our saint passing her days in practising penance, reciting prayers, holding communion with God, and toiling over her embroidery-frame. To her needlework she applied herself more earnestly than before, giving to it ten hours a day. Visitors came to her only with permission of her confessor. They were, as a rule, tertiaries who came to talk on spiritual things or to join the saint in her prayers. Every day she said the Divine Office. She loved the Rosary and did much to spread it among her friends. Besides the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin and devotion to the Holy Name there were two prayers she particularly delighted in: One was to pronounce the attributes of God, drawn up by her confessor into a list, and the other a prayer of her own making that she called her "garment." Her austerities were redoubled. To make time for all she did in the course of the day, she allowed herself only two hours of sleep, and then it was taken on a bed composed of gnarled roots, bits of broken crockery and glass. If she grew weary in her prayers, she used to fasten her hands to a nail in the wall and hang with her feet barely touching the ground, and in other ways ill-treat herself in order to conquer sleep.

Although her bodily tortures were terrible, those of her soul were not less so. Every day she had to endure some hours of extreme misery and desolation, during which she felt that God hated her and that she would surely be lost. But God could not look upon such heroic self-sacrifice without compensation, even in this life, for we cannot know what heights of spiritual gladness she reached during the frequent visits of the Divine Infant and His Blessed Mother in visible form. Out of obedience to her confessor she went to church only when her mother could go with her. Her love of the Blessed Sacrament and her realization of Our Lord's presence in the Holy Eucharist used to throw her into ecstasy. On those days, when her mother did not wish to accompany her, her obedience and self-restraint were often rewarded by being transported to the church in spirit, if not in body.

As time went on her yearning to do some active charity found outward expression in seeking out diseased and outcast Indian women whom she took into her own home for care. She also helped every case of misery among her own sex that came to her knowledge. While on one of these visits of mercy, being tempted to give way before her unpleasant task, she overcame the repulsion by swallowing a vessel filled with half-corrupted blood. This act of self-conquest had no ill effect, but obtained for her the gift of healing. She also gave assistance and consolation to her neighbors by means of the gift of prophecy, which enabled her to read the hearts of others. One prophecy that excited special interest was that a convent of Dominican tertiaries would be established in the city of Lima and that her own mother would become a nun there.

When she was twenty-seven, she was mysteriously espoused to Our Lord. On Palm Sunday, while praying in the Rosary Chapel, the statue became animate. The Blessed Virgin, turned to the Infant Jesus as if asking a favor, and at once the image smiled on the saint and said to her distinctly: "Rose of My heart, be thou My spouse." At first she was overcome, but when she regained speech she cried out to Our Lord that she was His servant, that she belonged to Him forever and longed to die for Him. To remind her of this admirable event she ever after wore a ring which had the power of working miracles, both before and after death.

Four years before her death she became so violently ill that prayers for the dying were recited; to those who were weeping

over her, however, she declared that her time was not yet come, and that the date of her death had long ago been made known to her. But it was plainly seen that after this illness her strength was nearly gone. As her confessor ordered her to soften her austerities, she left her hermitage and went to live with the De Massa family—friends whom she particularly loved. Here she begged for the humblest room, where she spent the remainder of her days, maintaining strict obedience towards the household, resuming many of her penances, and remaining a source of edification to all who saw her.

Finally her last illness came. Her death agony, lasting three weeks, she bore with utmost patience and outward serenity. On the eve of August 24th, 1617, she announced that she was going to die. Having received the last sacraments, she called for the blessing of her father and mother, took a loving farewell of all around her, had the mattress removed that, like her Saviour, she might die on wood, asked for a blessed candle, made the sign of the Cross, and with her last breath cried: "Jesus! Jesus! Be with me!"

After her death much honor was done her, but nothing proved the general belief in her sanctity and the efficacy of her intercession for her country better than the movement of reform and the raising of the standard of morality which took place in all parts of New Spain. In 1671 St. Rose was canonized and publicly proclaimed Patron-Saint of America and the Philippine Islands.

—Urban Cahill, O. P.