

DOMINICANA

Vol. XXIX

AUTUMN, 1944

No. 3

OUR LADY OF THE OAK

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DEVOTIONS to Our Lord and His Blessed Mother have always resulted in great spiritual and material gains. History is a constant witness to the well-being of peoples and places throughout the centuries as a result of their patronage to Christ and His Lady. Very many of these devotions are ages old, their beginnings traceable to years long passed. Recently, we in this country have seen the revival of a devotion to Our Divine Lord that has spread throughout our land. America's faith in, and love for, the Infant of Prague has reaped rich fruits in the few short years this particular form of homage has been practiced in the United States. An act of worship peculiar to an ancient country, this devotion has crossed a vast ocean in this generation and has grown miraculously in a very short time. And now another devotion gives signs of rising among us. This time it is in honor of the Infant's Mother.

The devotion to Our Lady of the Oak has a long and interesting history. The Italians of the small town of Viterbo first began it in 1417. Viterbo was a small and insignificant town near the famous city of Siena, on the road to Florence. In the days before Our Lady made Viterbo a noted site for pilgrims there was little of beauty or worth to attract attention to this village. Indeed, travelers would much rather pass this particular section with more than ordinary speed. The highway through this neighborhood was dangerous and difficult. The fifteenth century was not one of fast cars and speeding planes; lucky was

the man who could travel by horse or donkey. Mountainous terrain stretched for a long distance about Viterbo, and when the wayfarer descended to level ground he had to pass through dense forests of wide disrepute. Many large and murderous bands of highwaymen used these forests as hide-outs and secure means for plying their dangerous trade. It is little wonder that most men passed quickly to the comparative safety of Florence and other large cities.

In 1417 the owner of a vineyard at the outskirts of Viterbo, Baptisto Juzzante, decided that ordinary methods of protecting his property were not enough. Living in an age of great faith, it is not at all surprising that he should dedicate his vineyard to the Blessed Virgin. He had a picture painted on ordinary brick by an artist of the section. Martello, the artist, painted a typical Byzantine Madonna and Child. The Virgin Mother is shown holding the Infant tenderly while the Child is joyfully gazing at a tiny bird which He holds in His chubby hand. Baptisto brought this painting to his vineyard and attached it to one of the oaks bordering the highway. In a short time a natural shrine developed, for the large branches of the oak spread over and around the holy image, and the brilliant green foliage of the tree mingled with the royal purple and gold of the grapes to make a fitting tabernacle for the Mother and her Child. Immediately, the natives and travelers passing this spot began a devotion that was to grow into very great proportions in a short time.

The Blessed Virgin brought about two amazing events as a means of showing the people that she wished to do wonderful things here. There was a holy hermit living in the forest at the foot of one of the nearby mountains. Dominico Alberti often came to Viterbo from his oratory at the foot of the Mount of the Angel to beg his food. He soon became much attached to the image of our Lady. On one of his trips back to his hermitage he was overcome by an urge to take the brick painting along with him. Thinking that he could pray to the Virgin better, and meditate more devoutly upon the thoughts the painting brought to mind in his cell, the hermit took the image. The Virgin shortly showed him that she wanted devotion but she also wanted this devotion to be practiced where it belonged, at the vineyard. The hermit fell into a heavy sleep just outside his hermitage and upon awakening and entering his oratory he found that the Virgin and Child had disappeared. The painting

had returned to its rightful place! During the same period there was a holy woman of Viterbo who entertained similar ideas. This woman, Bartolomea, desired the painting for herself. One day she took it from the tree and secretly brought it to her own home. The next day it had gone back among the grapes and oaks! Bartolomea was a determined sort of lady, however; she went back and appropriated it once more. Not to be outwitted this time, she placed the painting at the bottom of a strong and heavy trunk in her home. A short time later she opened the trunk to gaze upon her treasure but again it had disappeared! No one attempted to take the brick painting after that.

Both the hermit and this lady talked of the unusual incident and the townspeople found that they had a real treasure. Their devotion and love for the Lady and her Child grew rapidly. It was not long before the Virgin began to show evidences of her love and power. The first incident showed beyond doubt that Our Lady was going to do strange things there. In 1467 a native of Viterbo was attacked by his enemies on the highway near the vineyard. He was an easy victim against so many assailants, so he dashed into the vineyard with the idea of hiding beside the tree of Our Lady. In his distress, he called upon the Blessed Virgin for help. The attackers rushed all over the arbor and although they looked everywhere they could not find their man. The oak tree, in a mysterious way, had locked him behind its branches and foliage so that he could not be seen! When he had told his story to the natives there was a tremendous demonstration of faith.

In the same year the people called upon Our Lady to rid them of a pestilence that overran Viterbo. With people dying in great numbers, those who could walk went to the image in supplication. The pestilence was quickly overcome. From then on the cult was a recognized practice among the people, publicly accepted by the priests and the town government. Siena was made secure against frequent earthquakes that had visited that city until the Siennese sought the Virgin's protection. After this time the city of Siena was secure against the tremblings of the earth! Shortly after this two Italians were seen to place some heavy chains at the shrine of the Virgin. Such actions aroused much curiosity, of course, and questions were immediately asked. The two men told a marvelous story. They informed the people that they had been captives in a Turkish prison and that these chains had held them in their cell for a very long

time. Both these men had heard of the Lady of the Oak and had begun to pray to her for deliverance. They had not prayed very long before they noticed that the chains had loosened and fallen away, leaving them entirely free and by some strange means they were able to escape from their prison. They had brought the chains with them, and placed them before their Madonna in thanksgiving and praise. These and many more wonderful events are told in the amazing history of Our Lady of the Oak.

In 1467 a beautiful chapel was built in honor of Mary, and great crowds were often present for prayer and devotions. In a few short years the cult had grown so that plans were made for a large and splendid church. This church was begun principally under the aid and direction of the Dominican Friars who had been given charge of the devotion to Our Lady.

There was a Dominican convent in Viterbo and these priests and brothers soon became devoted clients of Our Lady of the Oak. St. Dominic and his sons have always been noted for their particular love for the Mother of God and this was to be yet another manifestation of their devotion. Mary, on her part, showed her appreciation in showering favors and graces upon the convent and the Dominicans of Viterbo. On September 22, 1469, a solemn ratification was made in Rome whereby the Dominicans were to have the privilege of caring for and fostering the cult of Our Lady. At this time Viterbo was no longer an ordinary, small Italian village in the mountains. Great throngs crowded the tiny village constantly. Processions and other religious activities went on continuously; and as devotion to Our Lady of the Oak grew, so also the favors of Mary poured down upon her subjects. From now on Viterbo would have a fame that would be known throughout Europe, and that would later even cross the seas. No longer was it the infamous town that bordered robber-infested forests and tortuous highways.

Seeing the growing need for a more spacious and fitting place of worship, the Dominicans began their plans for the large and beautiful church that stands today as the center of devotion to Our Lady of the Oak. This church was begun in 1470 and took many long years to complete. Another Dominican convent was built beside the church, to enable the Friars to be on hand at all times. This new convent was called the Convent of Our Lady of the Oak, as was also the church. From the beginning, this convent, and the Friars there, became famous for their service

and patronage to Mary. The Dominicans in Viterbo were members of the Congregation of St. Mark, of which Savonarola was then an outstanding preacher. This fiery man influenced many of his brothers in returning to the zeal and holy fervor of the first days of the Order. The convent at Viterbo was always a model of strict religious life, and all looked to it for guidance and example.

Two Blesseds of the Order were living in Italy at this time, and both had an intense love for Our Lady of the Oak. Blessed Columba, we are told, was asked to cure a person possessed of the devil and she was able to do so immediately, after praying to Our Lady of the Oak for intercession. Blessed Lucy, a Dominican nun who lived in Viterbo, often visited the shrine and church of Our Lady. On one of her visits, while she was meditating during the celebration of Mass, she saw the figure of Our Lord in the Host that the priest was elevating for adoration. She saw Christ in the form of an Infant, and He was holding out His tiny arms towards her. It was at this time that she was blessed with the Holy Stigmata.

The Dominicans flourished during the peaceful ages but in later centuries many trying times and episodes came to Viterbo to try the faith and zeal of the brethren and the faithful there. When the armies of Napoleon conquered Italy, the convent was suppressed but in 1814 it rose again in greater and more powerful majesty. The people returned in ever greater numbers and their devotion was fostered by the exhortations and example of the Friars. The community was always a very fervent one yet the officials went a step further in assuring continued fervor and example on the part of the Dominicans. In 1843 Pope Gregory XVI heard the plea of the Prior and his subjects to make the convent one of strict observance. Pope Pius VI gave permission for a special Office to be chanted on the Fourth Sunday in September, the day set aside in honor of Our Lady of the Oak. This Office was given to all the clergy and the nuns of Viterbo, and was happily received by them. Popes Pius IX and X extended these privileges when they permitted Masses corresponding to this Office on many Saturdays. Besides this, they also allowed votive Masses of Our Lady to be celebrated.

At the time the convent became one of strict observance, a young man came to Viterbo from France to make his novitiate there. This youth was to become the famous Père Lacordaire, one of the greatest Dominican preachers of recent times. He

has written letters, wherein he speaks of his tremendous love for Our Lady of the Oak and he tells us that she was his patroness throughout life. This noted orator doubtlessly preached this devotion constantly throughout France, and Mary certainly must have gained many more loving and faithful children in that country. Père Besson, one of the great Dominican painters, made a splendid copy of the brick painting, and this copy was brought to France.

It seemed that the shrine and the convent were to have years of peace and joy but again armies and warfare put an end to such tranquil thoughts. Italy was to face the sad days of Civil War, and the convent and church were suppressed once more. The last restoration of this famous shrine of Viterbo was made by the Very Reverend Father Früwirth, one of the recent Masters General of the Order. To re-open the hallowed places, however, he had to purchase the property from the government which had confiscated it. During the pontificate of the late Pope Pius XI of happy memory, the present Master General, the Most Reverend M. S. Gillet, O.P., at the Holy Father's request presented the convent of Viterbo to the Holy See for use as a regional seminary. What the ravages of war will do in our own day is beyond the ken of any mere mortal. Prayer on our part can do much good; for if there has been no material damage up to this moment, our prayers can help mightily for continued preservation. If it is in the plans of Divine Providence that the war may in some way affect Viterbo, our prayers will be useful for a speedy restoration.

The devotion to Our Lady of the Oak may well grow into an immense and glorious act of homage on the part of Mary's children in the United States. We, who have the Immaculate Mother of God for our national patroness, should increase our love for her; and knowledge of what she has done in a little mountain village should show us, in a small way, what she can and will do for us here. Mary, who prevented earthquakes, stopped plagues, freed captives of the infidels, and cured so many spiritual and physical ills in that tiny town, surely can do all this and more for loving and faithful children in this country. We, who are in such need of renewed faith and hope in these times, could not look for a more powerful mediatrix than Mary, Our Lady of the Oak.