

# ST. GEMMA GALGANI

(1878-1903)

A VISITOR to the ancient city of Lucca, in the opening years of this century, strolling along the Via Zecca might have chanced on a strangely unedifying scene. A young girl of striking beauty was modestly making her way homewards with downcast eyes from one of the city churches. She was rather dowdily dressed, with battered hat of black straw, rusty black gown and mantle, and a little crucifix on her breast. A number of small boys were playing on the street as she passed. Suddenly they swarmed round the girl, tugging roughly at her clothing, shouting insults and words of derision, while some of the bolder even spat in her face. She showed no sign of resentment and, when some passers-by rescued her, went her way with a quiet word of thanks. It was not the first time her unconscious oddity of dress and manner had attracted the unwelcome attention of the street urchins of Lucca. But the only comment she was ever heard to make was in a whisper to her frightened companion, "If the world despises me I may hope one day to become a Saint."

She did become a Saint, one of a peculiarly rare and exalted type. And it needs no violent stretch of the imagination to picture some of those thoughtless boys, now grown to manhood, among the crowds of pilgrims from Lucca who rent the air of St Peter's with their *Vivas* on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1940, when Pius XII proclaimed the heroic sanctity of their victim and commended her to the veneration of the Universal Church. For the girl was Gemma Galgani.

Gemma's was a life marked throughout by divine favours of an extraordinary character ; but it was far indeed from being a life lived in a "stained-glass attitude." Though an ecstasica, "bearing in her body the marks of the Lord Jesus," the stigmata of His Sacred Passion, her spiritual life was quite hidden from the world. She was never the object of public curiosity or veneration. So far as she was known at all it was as a young girl of a piety too extreme to meet general approval. And there were no convent walls to shelter her from the misunderstandings and buffetings of the world. Her soul lived on the heights, but to ordinary appearances her life was commonplace enough. She was the busiest and most useful member of a large household, and went about her regular daily occupations to the last, as if she were quite unconscious of the high vocation by which she was singled out and set apart as a Victim of Divine Love. The little street scene just described shows her "in her habit as she lived" and is typical of the simplicity and humility that distinguished her whole life of labour and suffering.

She was the fourth of the eight children, and the eldest daughter, of Henry Galgani and Aurelia his wife, and was born at Camigliano, a village near Lucca on March 12th, 1878. At her baptism on the following day she was given the name of Gemma in spite of her mother's objection that there was no canonized Saint of the name. It was an objection that can never be raised again. Happily it was overruled that day by the half-playful remark of a priest who was by: "There are Gems in Heaven, and let us hope she may become one of them." But to be on the safe side, three Saints' names were added, including that of the Queen of all Saints.

A month after the birth of Gemma, the family removed to Lucca, chiefly in view of the larger facilities the city offered for the Christian education of the children. The Galgani parents were devout and enlightened Catholics, and naturally felt the importance of a sound Catholic schooling for their growing family. But all was not left to the school. Education began and continued in the home, and Gemma's first and most lasting lessons in Christian piety were received at her mother's knee. Her first prayers, her first simple lessons in the catechism, were learned from her mother's lips : her mother's crucifix was the first book in which she read the divine epic of the Man of Sorrows, and it was by her mother's side in their parish church that she first learned to taste the "hidden and unutterable sweetness of the Mass." "It was Mamma," she said years afterwards, "who made me long as a little one to go to Heaven."

At the age of three she was sent with her elder brothers to a private school in the city kept by two pious ladies, whom she surprised by her capacity for study and her taste for prayer. She had already, it would seem, attained the use of reason, and those ladies have since declared that when five years old she could read the Office of Our Lady from the Breviary as easily as a grown person. But there was nothing of the unlovely precociousness of the infant prodigy about her, and she endeared herself to all, companions and teachers alike, by her winning simplicity and good nature.

One reason why Gemma was sent to school so young may well have been that her mother about this time fell a victim to consumption. Her long lingering illness, endured with saintly resignation, was only embittered by the

thought that she must soon leave her children when they most needed her care. Gemma came to know that her mother was going to the heaven of which she had so often heard her speak, and her one wish was to go with her. Every day as she returned from school her first thought was to hurry to the sickroom fearing that her mother might have taken flight in her absence. Meanwhile the day of her Confirmation came, May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1885, and with it the first of those heavenly communications which played so large a part in her spiritual life. After the ceremony she was assisting at a Mass of thanksgiving “when all of a sudden,” she tells us, “a voice in my heart said to me: ‘Will you give me your Mamma?’ ‘Yes,’ I answered, ‘if you will take me as well.’ ‘No,’ the voice replied, ‘give me your Mamma without reserve. I will take you to heaven later.’ I could only answer ‘Yes,’ and when Mass was over I ran home.” It was her first great sacrifice and it cost her bitter grief and tears; but when her mother died a few months later it was Gemma who consoled the others

“Why should we cry? Mamma is gone to heaven.”

Shortly after her mother’s death, Gemma, now in her eighth year, was sent to the school of the Sisters of St. Zita in Lucca. Here she soon became, in the words of one of her teachers, “the soul of the school. Nothing was ever done without her . . . and all her companions bore her the greatest affection.” But she was no ready-made Saint, and for a time she had a hard struggle to be good. Her faults indeed were less of conduct than of character. She was a child of ardent temperament, full of life and high spirits, and rather apt to be impetuous. Some even called her a little madcap. Others, with less reason, thought her proud and wilful. But the frank innocent smile and candid eyes told a different story. “Gemma, Gemma,” one of the Sisters used to say, “if I did not read your eyes I would think as others do.” Under the same discerning Sister she acquired a greater taste for prayer, and a tender devotion to the Passion of Our Lord on which she began to meditate daily. Her love for the Mother of God was always deep and intense, the more so as she had lost her earthly mother. “If God has taken away my mother,” she would often say, “He has left me His own.” And her constant prayer was: “Holy Virgin, make me a Saint.” It was her custom to say the whole fifteen decades of the Rosary on her knees in the evening after her return from school. She even began to use penances and to rise in the night to pray. By these means and a continual watchfulness over herself she obtained the mastery over her natural impulsiveness of character and soon became so modest, retiring, and silent, that those who did not know her thought her naturally shy or stupid.

But it was a hard struggle. And the help she needed most and most desired was as yet denied her. She had long expressed the wish to make her First Communion. “You are too young,” the parish priest had told her, “you shall make it when you are seven.” But her seventh year had come and gone without any sign of the promise being fulfilled. When she began to attend the convent school she renewed her petitions with fresh hope. “Give me Jesus,” she would say to the Confessor or the Sisters, “and you will see how good I shall be: I will not sin again, I shall be quite changed.” But the custom of the time was against Communion at so early an age, and she was in her tenth year before permission was granted, and only, granted then by special exception. “There is no alternative,” the confessor declared, “but to admit her to Communion or see her die of grief.”

Gemma’s first thought in her abounding joy and gratitude was how to make the most of her happy privilege. She obtained the rather unwilling permission of her father to make a closed retreat of ten days in the convent, during which she saw nothing of her family. Her constant meditation was on the words of Christ which she heard in one of the instructions: “He that eateth me the same also shall live by me.” And the better to realize the life of Jesus in herself she asked to be more fully instructed in the mysteries of His Sacred Passion, to which she listened with many tears. Her little childish faults now took on a peculiar grossness, and she made a general confession of her short life and did it with such thoroughgoing detail that she found it necessary to make three visits to the confessor. One may imagine the angelic fervour with which she received her Lord for the first time on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1887. “I feel a fire burning here,” she said to one of her little fellow communicants afterwards, pointing to her breast. “Do you feel like that?” She could not imagine that there was anything exceptional in her own experience.

Her life henceforth was a constant growth in union with Jesus. “Gemma is good for nothing,” she would say, “but Gemma and Jesus can do all things.” And the closer her union with Him, the greater her desire that all should share in it. “She longed for the universal reign of Christ,” the Sister we have already quoted tells us, and took a specially keen interest in the work of the Propagation of the Faith and of the Holy Childhood, in which the children of the school

were enrolled. Her constant prayer was for the conversion of the infidel and for that of obstinate sinners nearer home, so that “the kingdom of Christ’s love might be extended over the whole earth.” But her growth in holiness and her zeal for souls did not interfere with her regular school work, and she even excelled her companions in her aptitude for learning. In mathematics, science, and literature, the chief subjects of the school curriculum, she always acquitted herself with distinction, and she had a special gift for music and painting. As the years went on, her devotion to study seemed excessive to those at home and was the subject of frequent remark : “Why do you study so much? You know such a lot already and you are not satisfied.” Needless to say religion was her favourite subject, and in Christian Doctrine, Sacred Scripture, and Church History she showed unusual proficiency. Towards the close of her school career she was entered for a competitive examination in Christian Doctrine open to the children of the various parishes of the city, and she was awarded the gold medal and a prize of five pounds. Such success seemed to augur a brilliant future. She was now sixteen and her father offered, if she wished, to send her to the University. But Gemma’s answer was a decided “ No: no University for me!”

Her decision, doubtless, was a blow to her father. Gemma was his favourite child: he had high hopes of her and was very proud of her beauty of mind and person. His partiality, indeed, amounted to imprudence, and Gemma would sometimes gently remonstrate with him and remind him that he had other children to consider. “I know,” he would say, “I love them all, but then you are my eldest daughter.” He would have her as his constant companion out of doors. Her clothes should come from the most expensive shops. Any excuse for lunch in the city meant bringing her to the best hotels. If it chanced she was not in his company his first inquiry on his return home was: “Where is Gemma?”—generally answered by a nod towards the little room where she shut herself up to work and pray in solitude. Without meaning it, for he was a deeply religious man, he did all in his power to spoil her. But Gemma was not to be spoiled. She did indeed try to fall in with his fancies. And once, to please him, when she went to receive her gold medal at the public distribution of prizes by the Archbishop of Lucca, she wore a stylish costume specially made for the occasion, with a pretty necklace, a ring, and other trinkets, and a gold watch. It was her last appearance as a smart young woman of the world. On her return from the ceremony as she laid aside her finery, her Guardian Angel, to whom she always had a great devotion, appeared to her with the words, ‘ “The true ornaments of a spouse of the Crucified are Thorns and the Cross.” She never wore her worldly finery again.

Thorns and the Cross were no strangers to Gemma, and were henceforth to be the normal experience of her life. Already she had passed through a painful spiritual crisis, lasting a whole year, during which her intense love for Jesus was overshadowed by the feeling of being abandoned by Him. She saw nothing in herself but evil, nothing in her daily life but scandal to others. Prayer was a torture to her. Her devotion turned to repugnance and disgust. She met the trial by a still more earnest fidelity to her spiritual exercises: more than ever the crucifix and the tabernacle were the two poles of her life. The members of her family noticed the change in her, and completely misunderstood it. They reproached her with spending too much time in church, opposed her rising early for Mass, and generally added to the bitterness of her sufferings with the best intentions, But the trial passed leaving her soul with a fresh strength to face the sufferings that were still to come.

Gemma’s school life was brought to an end by a painful illness. An injury to her foot which she made light of resulted in caries of the bone and laid her up for some months. An operation was necessary, but she refused an anaesthetic and with eyes fixed on the crucifix suffered the excruciating pain without a moan. The doctors were amazed, and applauded her courage and endurance. But Gemma only smiled: she knew the secret of it.

Restored to health she now took her place in the home to do the duties that naturally fall to the eldest daughter in a motherless family. They were many, for it was a large household, and her hands were never idle. In the intervals of domestic work she busied herself in making altar linen and vestments for the church or clothing for the poor. She had a particular care for the religious education of her young brothers and sisters, teaching them their catechism, leading their daily prayers, or bringing them to the devotions in church. And in their childish differences and quarrels she was always, as one of them said, the “bearer of the olive branch.” But her activities were not confined to the home. She would often gather the poor children of the neighbourhood together for religious instruction. She frequently visited the sick in hospital, bringing them little material comforts but especially “comforting them with thoughts of God.” Her charity to the poor and afflicted went almost to the point of extravagance. She not only dispensed food and clothing

with unstinted hand to those who came to her door, but she sought out those unable or unwilling to come and whose needs she knew. Every time she went out she would ask her father for money to give in charity, and if sometimes he refused she would coax permission to take bread or flour or whatever she could lay her hands on at the moment. When family circumstances became straitened and she was reminded that she could no longer afford to be so generous she would reply: "The Providence of God will never fail." At last her Confessor severely restricted her bounty and her father cut off money supplies. Poor Gemma was plunged in grief and left the house as little as possible to avoid meeting the poor whom she could not help.

Her home duties and her pressing concern for others were in no sense an obstacle to the growth of her interior life. Rather the contrary: her busy life of active charity drew its inspiration from her life of prayer and union with God. When she was most occupied with external things she seemed to those around her wholly absorbed in God. "Her life was one continual prayer," says a priest who knew her well, "and her prayer-book was the crucifix." The thought of the sufferings of Christ never left her, and it was in those days, as she tells us, she "began to feel a growing desire to love Jesus Crucified with all her heart, and together with this a longing to help Him in His sufferings." "O Jesus," she prayed, "I wish to follow Thee whatever it may cost me of suffering—to follow Thee fervently . . . I wish to suffer, to suffer, oh, so much, for Thee." The mystery in which "the memory of His Passion is recalled" was therefore the centre around which her whole spiritual life revolved. And a glimpse of her at this time by an eye-witness gives a vivid impression of the fervour of her devotion to the Holy Eucharist. The words are those of Miss Ethel Rose, an English convert: "I saw her one day in the church of St Michael as I awaited my turn for confession . . . A priest came to give Holy Communion to the people, and among them was a young girl who made a deep impression on me, not only by her modesty and recollection, but by the extreme pallor of her face. I was so fascinated that I watched her for nearly an hour. I observed how she received Jesus, and afterwards, her face lighted up and flushed with the ardour of her love, how she knelt by the altar with hands clasped and head gently bowed upon her breast totally absorbed in prayer. She was like a statue." The impression thus made on a complete stranger was not less than that produced on the members of her own household, under whose somewhat more critical and exacting observation her daily life was passed. They did not always understand her, but they could not help admiring how perfectly she seemed to combine her home duties and her charitable activities for others with the closest union with God. But "there is only one Gemma," they said. And an old man-servant of the family who knew her long and intimately, in after days summed up his impression of her in a phrase of simple eloquence: "Gemma stood alone—there was no one like her."

Those happy home days were soon to pass. Gemma seemed to have a sense of coming tragedy. In her spiritual diary at the opening of 1897 she wrote: "In this new year I purpose to begin a new life. I know not what is going to happen to me this year. I abandon myself to Thee, O my God . . . I feel my weakness, O Jesus, but I rely on Thy assistance . . ."

The Galgani family had hitherto been in easy circumstances. The father was a chemist with a flourishing business in Lucca and a country house and considerable property in its neighbourhood. He was a large-hearted man with little worldly prudence. His good nature was well known and often unscrupulously turned to account. People would come to borrow money or ask his signature to bills of exchange, and no one with a plausible case was refused. If his tenants were behind-hand with their rents, or his customers with their accounts, they were never pressed. The result eventually was disaster for his family. Signor Galgani was spared the worst. He died in November, 1897, and Gemma's sad forebodings at the opening of the year were more than fulfilled. Her father's body was scarcely cold when his creditors obtained an execution, seized his property and turned his family into the street. With a truculence hard to imagine, they even searched the children's pockets for money and took from Gemma the few pence found on her person. The Galganis were reduced to hopeless beggary and were forced to live on the charity of strangers. The relatives who might have assisted them were in great part involved in their father's ruin.

Gemma found refuge for a time with an aunt almost as poor as herself. It was about this time that she received more than one tempting offer of marriage which to a girl less spiritual might have seemed a providential way out of her difficulties. To Gemma who wished to belong entirely to Jesus they were an insufferable annoyance. She was suddenly freed from all annoyance of the kind by a disease which made sad havoc of her personal beauty. She had felt symptoms of its oncoming, but her repugnance to medical examination made her conceal them till she found herself a

helpless invalid with tuberculosis of the spine. Her pitiful condition, and the patience and sweetness with which she suffered, got abroad and drew many pious visitors to her bedside. One of these brought her the Life of St Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows, already famed for his sanctity and miracles though not yet canonized. Some had begun to pray to this young Passionist for her recovery. Gemma at first took little interest in the Life or in her friends' prayers, being equally pleased to live or die as God willed. But having once invoked the Saint's name in a distressing temptation with instant effect, she read the book not once but several times and conceived a special devotion to him. More than once he appeared to her, speaking words of consolation and encouragement, but she never once dreamed of asking him for her cure. In February, 1899, the doctors pronounced her case hopeless and she received the Last Sacraments. Her confessor, Mgr. Volpi, auxiliary Bishop of Lucca and afterwards Bishop of Arezzo, who was then spiritual director of the Visitation Nuns at Lucca, visited her on February 19<sup>th</sup> and suggested she should make a novena to St Margaret Mary Alacoque for her recovery. Twice she began the novena, but forgot to continue it. What followed may be best told in her own words: "On the 23<sup>rd</sup> February I began it for the third time, or rather had meant to begin it for it was now within a few minutes of midnight, when I heard the clink of a rosary beads and felt a hand laid on my brow. A voice said the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Gloria nine times in succession. I hardly answered I was so weak. Then the voice said: 'Do you wish to be cured? Yes, you will be cured. Pray with faith to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I will come every evening till the end of the novena and we shall pray together to the Sacred Heart.' 'And what of Blessed Margaret Mary?' I asked. 'Repeat the Gloria three times in her honour.' It was the Passionist, St Gabriel. He came every evening and we recited the prayers together. The novena was to end on the first Friday of March. Early that morning I received Holy Communion. Oh, what happy moments I passed with Jesus. He, too, asked me, 'Do you wish to be cured? 'My emotion was so great that I could not speak, but in my heart I answered, 'Whatever Thou wilt, O Jesus!' . . . The grace was granted. I was cured. I rose from bed. Those in the house were crying for joy. I too was pleased, but not so much that I had been cured as that Jesus had chosen me for His child. For that morning before He left me He had said: ' My child, the grace thou hast received this morning will be followed by many others still greater.'"

Gemma's cure was complete and permanent. Her illness had lasted more than a year and had brought her to death's door, but ever afterwards her health was perfectly normal and even robust. Her first thought after her recovery was one she had long entertained-of entering a convent. Circumstances had hitherto made it impossible to realize, but now her way seemed clear. Several religious communities in Lucca would gladly have accepted her, and even encouraged her hopes. But ecclesiastical authority was slow to believe in the permanence of her sudden cure from such a dangerous disease: and Gemma, to her grief, found the convent doors gently and regretfully but firmly barred against her. Meanwhile her spiritual life grew in intensity and fervour, her union with God became more conscious and intimate, and her soul began to be visited with divine communications of the most extraordinary and exalted kind. She had been accustomed even during her illness to make the Holy Hour in honour of the agony of Jesus in Gethsemani. In gratitude for her recovery she now promised the Sacred Heart of Jesus that she would never omit it. And on the Holy Thursday following she prepared for this pious exercise by a general confession of her whole life. It was as if she knew what the Holy Hour was to mean to her, for it was during this hour that Jesus henceforth began to pour into her soul those marvellous graces which made of her life a martyrdom of love. Her first experience on this Holy Thursday she thus described to her spiritual director

"I spent the whole hour praying, and weeping for my sins. Feeling weak I sat down. The sorrow continued, but after a little I felt rapt in recollection. Shortly afterwards I suddenly lost the use of my senses. I tried to get up and lock the door of my room. Where was I? I found myself in the presence of Jesus Crucified, blood flowing from His wounds. The sight filled me with pain. I lowered my eyes and made the sign of the Cross: I felt great peace of mind, but still intense sorrow for my sins. I had not the courage to look at Jesus. I bent down with forehead to the ground and remained so for several hours . . . when I came to myself the wounds of Jesus were so impressed on my mind that they have never since left it."

The vision filled Gemma with a new horror for sin and with an intense desire to suffer with Jesus and to become a victim for the salvation of souls. The desire was to be gratified in a way she little expected. One morning after Holy Communion she heard the voice of Jesus say to her, "Courage, Gemma, I await thee on Calvary whither thou goest."

The meaning of the words was soon made plain. A few days later, on Thursday, June 8<sup>th</sup>, the eve of the Feast of the Sacred Heart, when she began as usual to make the Holy Hour, she felt a piercing sorrow for her sins such as she had never experienced, and a peculiarly vivid sense of the sufferings of Jesus. Suddenly she was rapt in ecstasy and found herself in presence of her heavenly Mother and her Guardian Angel. The angel made her repeat an act of contrition, and Mary comforted her with the assurance that her sins were forgiven, and told her she was to receive a great grace through the love of Jesus. "Then"—they are Gemma's own words—"she opened her mantle and covered me with it. At the same moment Jesus appeared with His wounds open: but instead of blood, flames as it were of fire seemed to issue from them. In an instant those flames touched my hands and feet and heart. I felt as if I were dying and should have fallen to the floor, had not my Mother supported me under her mantle. I remained in that position some hours. Then she kissed my forehead, the vision disappeared and I found myself on my knees alone: but I still felt intense pain in my hands, feet, and heart. I rose to go to bed, but I found that blood was flowing from the places where I had the pain. I covered them as well as I could and got into bed with the help of my Guardian Angel. Next morning I found it difficult to go to Holy Communion. I put on a pair of gloves to hide my hands. But I could scarcely stand, and felt every moment that I should die. Those pains continued until three o'clock on Friday, the Feast of the Sacred Heart."

Apart from her confusion and distress at such a sinner being so favoured, Gemma's only thought seems to have been like that which occurred to her after her First Communion when she felt a fire burning in her heart—that it was a common experience with those whom Jesus had chosen for His own. She began to make timid inquiries among her friends during the day, but only succeeded in mystifying them without obtaining any information. At last, feeling that she must confide in someone, as the blood continued to flow, she went to her aunt and holding up her hands said with the simplicity of a child, "Aunt, see what Jesus has done to me." The good woman was struck dumb with amazement, but as little understood the meaning of the strange phenomenon as Gemma herself.

The phenomenon was repeated regularly every Thursday evening, beginning about eight o'clock and lasting until three in the afternoon of Friday. Gemma seemed to pass through all the phases of the Passion and bore in her body all the marks of Christ's physical sufferings: not only the wounds in hands, feet, and side, but the punctures of the crown of thorns, the marks of the scourging, the wound on the shoulder caused by the weight of the Cross, all accompanied with the most excruciating pain. Throughout those hours she engaged in loving colloquies with Jesus in a low voice, often tenderly pleading for mercy for sinners and offering herself as a victim in expiation for their sins.

For some little time Gemma kept these extraordinary occurrences a secret even from her confessor: partly through her extreme humility, partly through the difficulty of explaining them in the confessional. A few weeks after they began, however, a mission was given by the Passionist Fathers in Lucca which Gemma attended. After the general Communion on the last day of the mission, she heard an interior voice which said: "You shall be a daughter of my Passion, and a favourite daughter: one of these shall be a father to thee: go and make everything known to them." She found a prudent and sympathetic adviser in one of the missionaries, who communicated with Mgr. Volpi, her confessor, with the result that the Passionist Father Germanus was ultimately appointed her spiritual director. Mgr. Volpi was perplexed and doubtful about the genuineness of the manifestations. The mission Father and those whom he consulted were equally at a loss. Father Germanus, a priest of large experience and of a dry and scientific turn of mind, was frankly sceptical when first consulted by Mgr. Volpi, declined to have anything to do with Gemma, and advised him to make his penitent follow the beaten track. It was only after considerable pressure that he was induced to visit her. After a searching and thorough investigation, however, he came to recognize in her an elect soul, "a true Gem of the Sacred Heart of Jesus," and remained her spiritual director for the rest of her life.

"It is good to hide the secret of the King." And one of Gemma's chief anxieties was to keep the secret of the great things God had done to her from profane eyes. It was soon evident that in her aunt's house this was impossible. The younger members of the family were curious: not one was sympathetic: things began to be talked of outside, and in no kindly spirit. Gemma was frequently rapt in ecstasy even in the course of her daily occupations, and was thus at the mercy of the light-minded. She had to suffer much in consequence. At length, through the influence of the Passionist Fathers, she was received into the home of their benefactors the Giannini, a well-known family in Lucca, first as an occasional guest, finally as an adopted daughter. The household consisted of the father and mother with eleven children, and an aunt named Cecilia, who already knew and admired Gemma and was henceforth to act the part of a

mother to her. The character of this family may be guessed from a sentence or two of the father's evidence in the Process for the Beatification of Gemma where, telling of her influence in his home, he speaks of "my five sons who are a great consolation to me. They go to Holy Communion every day and are much engaged in the field of Catholic Action. Of my daughters five are nuns, one has remained at home, and one is married."

Here Gemma was sheltered from the prying eyes of the world and from the reputation for uncommon sanctity which she so dreaded. Her life in the Giannini household may surprise those who perhaps imagine that a life of exalted and continuous prayer must be one of inaction. For it was a life of constant and useful activity. Signor Giannini, just quoted, summed it up by saying, "Gemma was never idle." "At first when she came to us," says her friend Cecilia, "she used to crochet, but she preferred knitting or mending stockings, because I believe it permitted her to keep more recollected. It kept her busy, for she mended for the whole family. She was always ready to do whatever there was to do. If there was need she put the rooms in order, assisted others with their work, helped the children with their lessons. She was never unoccupied." A priest who lived with the family and saw her at her daily duties could not help admiring "her spirit of recollection and union with God. Even in the midst of the most distracting domestic occupations she always seemed as if absorbed in God and in continual meditation. But this did not hinder her from attending with great care to whatever she was doing."

A duty she especially coveted was the care of the sick. "She always looked after those who were ill in the house with the greatest care and attention, punctual with their medicine, noting their temperature, and in all things showing the greatest kindness, charity, and intelligence . . . and all this she did for the love of God." The charity to the poor which she had practised as a child in her own home, and which her poverty checked for a time, now found a fresh and ample outlet. Her benefactors allowed her to exercise a large discretion in giving alms of their goods, and she always put aside something of her own at table for the poor. "But," says Cecilia Giannini, "I did not want to encourage poor people to come to the house in a procession, it might have led to awkward incidents." So Gemma dispensed her charities outside, "at the foot of the steps in the loggia," where her friend often watched her from a window above, sitting with the poor, giving them good advice, instructing them in some point of Christian Doctrine, or comforting them in their sorrows with the thought of Jesus Crucified. Gemma, indeed, seems to have had a special devotion to the spiritual work of mercy that concerns the instruction of the ignorant: for Signor Giannini tells us that even when she went with the family to their country house she would gather the men and boys of the neighbourhood to teach them their catechism and give them some appropriate spiritual instruction.

Few indeed would have suspected from Gemma's external life the sublime spiritual heights to which she was raised. Her simplicity and humility threw an effective veil over the secrets of her interior life. A priest, who frequently visited the Giannini family and knew her well, was unaware of her extraordinary holiness till death revealed it. "Her modesty and simplicity," he tells us, "made a most pleasing impression on me. And though I often came in contact with her I could not find in her the smallest imperfection . . . Her words were few and in answer only to questions asked of her. I never heard her speak of herself. But while knowing well that she had a most delicate conscience and a beautiful soul, all intent on loving God, I should never have thought that she was so far advanced in sanctity." Father Germanus tells us that if there was a virtue characteristic of Gemma, it was her evangelical simplicity. It distinguished her from childhood and accompanied her all along her ascent to the summits of the supernatural life. "With her, yes was yes, and no was no, white was white, and black was black: there were no middle meanings, no folds in her heart, and as she felt so she spoke and so she acted." She could not bear to think or speak to the detriment of anyone. "You would need a wrench," a witness said in the Processes, "to draw a word from her regarding others, even when the information was necessary, if it had to be an unfavourable word." In conversation on spiritual subjects, though she spoke freely, she never took the lead or professed to know more than others. She was frequently rapt in ecstasy during the day, but on returning to herself went on with her work apparently unconscious of any interruption. And after the long weekly ecstasy "she would rise as if nothing had happened, wash away the stains of the blood which had flowed so profusely, draw down her sleeves to cover the large scars on her hands, and believing that no one had noticed her, would return to the other members of the family and take her part in the work of the day."

It was her simplicity that led her to think at first that her mystical experiences were common with those who wish to love God. And when she realized that they were exceptional, she was haunted by the fear that she might be

deceived or a deceiver. She had heard of such cases from those least qualified to deal with her. She had even heard a whisper of the ugly word, hysteria. And she would ask her director : “Am I to believe it—is Jesus, or the devil, or my own imagination? I am ignorant, and may be deceived. What would become of me if I were the victim of delusion? You know I do not wish these things. I only wish Jesus to be pleased with me.” Or again, “ Can it be that I am a deceiver ? If I am I shall lose my soul. I should like you to explain what a deceiver is, for I do not want to deceive anyone.” She found her only consolation in absolute obedience to her confessor and her spiritual director: “Oh, what consolation my heart finds in obedience! It fills me with a calm I cannot explain. Dear obedience! Source of all my peace.”

Her child-like simplicity was wedded to a deep and touching humility. She seemed to be unaware of her high spiritual gifts and regarded herself, like the Apostle, as the chief of sinners. Once during a retreat made in childhood she had heard the preacher say, “Remember that we are nothing and that God is all,” and the words made an impression which never faded. The thought was always in the forefront of her mind, and as she grew in the knowledge of God she saw less and less of good in herself and was filled with confusion and dismay at the divine favours granted to her. The more God exalted her the more deeply she sank in her own estimation. She always sought the humblest place and the most menial duties, and “If through the mercy of God,” she once said, “I have experienced some happy moments they were when I saw myself despised and humiliated.” Again and again she implored Our Lord to withdraw His extraordinary favours from her and bestow them on someone more worthy. She dreaded the account she should have to give for her fancied want of correspondence with God’s grace, and she put her whole trust in His mercy. “Thy mercy, O Lord,” she would say, “is the anchor of my soul. I know that Thy mercy is greater than my ingratitude . . . . If I saw the gates of hell open and I stood on the edge of the abyss, I should not despair, I should not lose hope of mercy, because I should trust in Thee.” And when asked on her death-bed what was her favourite ejaculation she answered simply: “My Jesus, mercy.”

Under the calm unruffled exterior of her life in the Giannini household Gemma was all the time suffering a veritable spiritual martyrdom. She had once said “Jesus is the Man of Sorrows and I wish to become the daughter of sorrows.” The wish was fulfilled in part by her share in the physical sufferings of Christ, but she was to taste also of the sorrow and dereliction of His soul. In one of her first ecstasies Jesus had revealed to her something of the griefs and humiliations she was to endure for the rest of her short life. He told her that she should show the sincerity of her love when her heart became as a rock and she would feel nothing but aridity of spirit, affliction and temptation. “ The devils will make continual efforts to wreck your soul. They will put evil thoughts in your mind, fill you with a hatred for prayer, with doubts and fears. You will suffer outrages and injuries: no one will believe in you . . . . Heaven will seem deaf to your prayers . . . . You will seek Jesus and will not find Him: He will appear to have forsaken you . . . . When you call on the Blessed Virgin and the Saints they will seem to have no pity and to have abandoned you. When you go to Holy Communion or to Confession you will have no fervour. You will go through your exercises of devotion as if by routine, and you will feel the time lost Yet you will believe, but as if you did not believe : you will hope, but as if you did not hope: you will love Jesus, but as if you did not love Him, because you will be bereft of all feeling. You will grow weary of life and yet be afraid of death, and you will not be able to find relief even in tears.” It was an image of the desolation of Jesus in Gethsemani and His dereliction on the Cross, and it was all fulfilled to the letter in the life of this heroic child, who, Father Germanus tells us, was so natural and unaffected that she could scarcely have been distinguished from an ordinary young Catholic girl.

Gemma had offered herself as a victim, in union with the sufferings of Jesus, for her own sins and the sins of the world, and she yearned to make the sacrifice complete by consecrating herself to God in the religious life. She had never lost her childhood’s desire of entering a convent. And from the time she first met the Passionists and heard of a contemplative Order of Passionist Nuns she felt that her place was with them. There was a convent of the Order at Corneto, some two hundred miles from Lucca, and after asking advice she determined to go there for a course of spiritual exercises and ask admission. She met with a decided refusal, worded in no very genial terms, from a Reverend Mother who seemed wiser in her generation than the children of light. It was a bitter disappointment to Gemma, but she bore it bravely and patiently. Subsequent efforts were made in her behalf by Mgr. Volpi and Father Germanus, but without effect. Gemma began as far as she could to lead the life of a Passionist Nun outside the

cloister. She had already made a vow of chastity during her serious illness, and to this she now added with her Confessor's approval the vows of poverty and obedience. She wore the Sign of the Passion on her heart underneath her clothing, and recited the Divine Office daily like the Passionist Nuns in choir. And she never lost the hope till near the end of her life of joining them, if not at Corneto, elsewhere.

Her hope was in some sense strangely realized. In her first letter to Father Germanus, before she had yet met him, she predicted in minute detail the establishment of a convent of Passionist Nuns at Lucca. There was no thought of such a project at the time, but a year or two later it began to be talked of. Gemma was filled with enthusiasm and began to pray and to use all the influence in her power to hasten the coming of the nuns. The difficulties in the way seemed at times insuperable, but she was never disheartened. During the last year of her life it was her constant thought and the constant object of her prayers. She even searched Lucca more than once for a suitable site and interested herself in the material resources necessary for the foundation. She still had hopes of finding her vocation in the new convent. But towards the end she made the sacrifice even of these, if only the work on which she had set her heart might be accomplished: "I no longer ask to enter a convent . . . Jesus has the habit of a Passionist Nun waiting for me at the gates of Heaven. Let me die so that the Passionist convent may be established." She assured those who were losing heart that the foundation would be begun after her death and completed in the year of the Beatification of St Gabriel. Her words, contrary to all expectation, were verified by the event. Two years after Gemma's death the first little group of Passionist Sisters came to Lucca, and though they met with many obstacles and disappointments a full community took possession of the new convent in 1908, just two months after St Gabriel was beatified. Pius X, of holy memory, had already blessed the project, and, in words which would have brought joy to the heart of Gemma, assigned as the special object of the community that "of offering themselves as victims to Our Lord for the spiritual and temporal needs of the Church and of the Sovereign Pontiff."

The convent continues to flourish. Gemma's body reposes near the altar in the little chapel and the nuns venerate her as their foundress and the patroness of their work. "The Passionist Nuns would not accept me," she had said, "but for all that I wish to be one of them, and I shall be with them when I am dead." So was Gemma's wish fulfilled at last. "If for reasons independent of her will," writes a companion of hers now a Carmelite nun, "Gemma never wore the Passionist habit, she was none the less a true Passionist. She was a Passionist in soul, and she had the spirit of the Passionists. The Order has made her its own. Her convent has been established for years and continues to flourish exceedingly." The same thought was expressed by Benedict XV in the decree introducing the Cause of her Beatification: "The pious virgin, Gemma Galgani, if not by habit and profession, undoubtedly by desire and affection is rightly numbered among the religious children of St Paul of the Cross." And Pius XI in proclaiming her heroic sanctity congratulated "the sons and daughters of St Paul of the Cross on the possession of this true gem of sanctity who would be an additional honour to their Congregation." Gemma had once described herself as "wandering like a soul that had gone astray": her long cherished vocation was at last realized and perhaps no vocation ever cost a more painful sacrifice.

Gemma's whole life indeed was one long uninterrupted sacrifice of the most heroic kind. To a worldly mind such a life of suffering may seem an irritating and insoluble mystery. There is one secret which fully explains it. From her earliest childhood the contemplation of Jesus Crucified filled her with a sense of her own sinfulness and a desire to atone for it, and then to be associated with Him in His sufferings and to share them in expiation of the sins of the world. To win souls for Jesus through prayer and suffering was the one passion of her life. Even as a child at school, her teacher says, "Gemma suffered because sin was committed. I remember that when she was quite a small child she grieved if any of her companions acted wrongly . . . She prayed much, but especially for poor sinners, and offered for them such mortifications as a child can perform." It was the feature of her life which the witnesses to her sanctity invariably singled out as characteristic of her. "She was specially attracted to pray for poor sinners." "She was much afflicted by the thought of the sins committed in the world and she often offered herself to God on behalf of sinners." "She would gladly have gone through the world . . . to work for the extension of Christ's kingdom by converting pagans, heretics, and sinners." "The sins of mankind and the insults these offences offered to Jesus were an acute and constant source of suffering to Gemma." She was often heard in ecstasy pleading for sinners and even offering her life for them. "What dost thou wish, O Jesus? . . . My life? It is Thine . . . I have already offered it to Thee. Wilt thou be

pleased if I offer it again as a victim in expiation for my sins and those of all sinners? If I had a hundred lives I would give every one of them to Thee.”

And in her letters she frequently returns to the same thought: “What is sweeter than to be filled with the thought of Jesus and to kneel before that Divine Victim of love and sorrow—a Victim for my sins, for my salvation and for the salvation of souls?” “I should willingly give every drop of my blood to please Him and to prevent sinners offending Him.” “I shall be satisfied only when I am a victim—may it be soon—to make reparation for my innumerable sins and for the sins of all the world.” She did not confine herself to intercession for sinners in general, but almost constantly “carried on her shoulders,” as she would say, some obstinate sinner for whom she was asked to pray. And endless conversions were wrought by her prayers, from the dying man that refused to receive the Last Sacraments, who was converted by her prayers as a child at school, to the notorious sinner of Lucca whose conversion was announced to her the day before she died. Her sufferings were not meaningless, nor merely a personal discipline: they were the instrument of a great apostolate for the sanctification of souls, and especially for the conversion of sinners, that drew all its inspiration and all its virtue from her continual union with Jesus Crucified.

Gemma had offered herself to God as a victim in expiation of the sins of men, and her offering had been accepted. She had shared in all the sufferings of Jesus except one—the last and greatest, the agony and dereliction of His last hours on the Cross. Terribly as she had hitherto suffered in soul and body her suffering had been in secret, and her life was more like Gethsemani than Calvary. After her miraculous cure her health had been perfectly normal, and no one would have suspected that the strong, healthy girl was enduring the tortures of a living martyrdom. But the moment came when her sufferings could no longer be hidden: it was the immolation of the victim. At Pentecost, 1902, she was suddenly stricken with a mysterious illness which lasted, with one short interval, for the remaining nine months of her life. She could not taste any food, her body was torn with the most violent pains, and she was reduced to a skeleton. At first she managed to drag herself to church, with the aid of her friend Cecilia, for Mass and Holy Communion, but this consolation soon had to be abandoned. Doctors were called in, but disagreed in their diagnosis and for the most part confessed themselves baffled by the mysterious nature of her disease. The pains which racked her body without ceasing were aggravated by furious assaults of the devil on her body and her soul, so fiendish and continuous that she imagined herself possessed and begged to be exorcized. Her heroic life, all the virtues she had practised, all the divine favours she had received, were now represented to her as an accumulation of hypocrisy and deceit. And during all those months of suffering no ray of divine consolation reached her heart. She continued to pray unceasingly, calling on Jesus and Mary to be with her in this hour of bitter dereliction, and outwardly preserved a serene and unruffled calmness. Of her bodily pains she never complained but once, when she murmured, “My Jesus, it is more than I can bear”: but when the Sister in attendance on her reminded her that with God’s grace it is possible to bear all things, she never used the words again. On the contrary when the Sister once asked her “If you had your choice which would it be: to go at once to heaven and cease to suffer or to remain here and suffer for the glory of God?” “Better to suffer,” she said, “than go to Heaven when the pain is for Jesus and His glory.”

One last consolation remained to Gemma and of this she was soon to be deprived. Pitiably as was her condition she was at least in the midst of affectionate friends. Some of the doctors, however, were of opinion that her disease was tuberculosis, and Father Germanus was anxious that the children of the family should not be exposed to the danger of infection. It was decided to remove Gemma, much to the disappointment of the Gianninis, who offered strong opposition. Some months passed indeed before they could be induced to consent to it. At last a compromise was made and a room was rented in a neighbouring street from which communication could be held with the Gianninis’ home by means of a bell fixed to a cord stretched across an intervening courtyard. Here Gemma was removed on February 24<sup>th</sup>, making her last sacrifice with a calm resignation that astonished even those who knew her best. She might well say, “I have made a sacrifice of everything—nothing now remains for me but to prepare for death.” Death was not far off. Some two months later, on Good Friday; she entered with outstretched arms into a prolonged ecstasy, nailed, as she said, with Jesus to the Cross. Those who saw her suffering throughout that day and the following night knew that the end was at hand. On Holy Saturday a priest was called and gave her Extreme Unction, and then Gemma was left alone to taste the full bitterness of the desolation of Jesus on Calvary. She had prayed to die in loneliness and her prayer was

heard. The end came peacefully when with a look of seraphic joy on her face she gave up her pure soul to God an hour after midday on Holy Saturday, April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1903.

Gemma Galgani was beatified by Pius XI on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1933, and canonized by Pius XII on Ascension Thursday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1940. Among the vast multitude that filled St Peter's on the day of her Canonization were thirteen hundred of the citizens of Lucca headed by their archbishop. Many of them had known her, including the numerous members of the Giannini family which had so devotedly befriended her. There too was her youngest sister Angelina sitting by the side of the nun of St. Zita who had taught her as a child and guided her first steps in the path of heroic sanctity.

The feast of St Gemma is kept on 14<sup>th</sup> of May.

\*\*\*\*\*