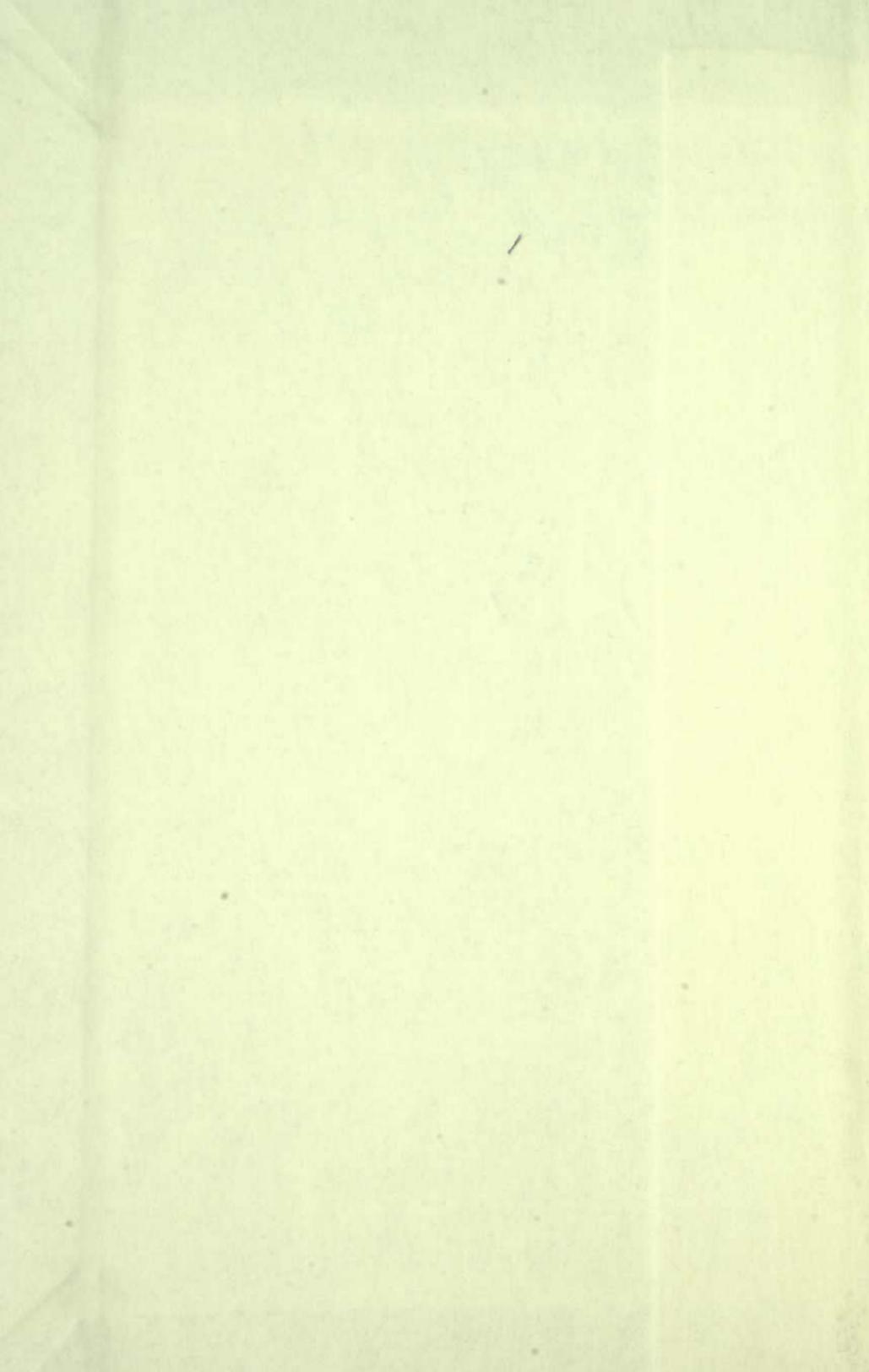


UNIVERSITY OF ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE



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ST GERTRUDE THE GREAT

SECOND EDITION



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PREFACE

GOD, Who is wonderful in His Saints,* has in times past and in divers manners made His holy will known to men through the most unlikely instruments. With Him there is no distinction of Jew or Gentile, bond or free,† young or old. Neither country, nor sex, nor century is an obstacle to His mercies ; and the whole history of the Church is full of ever recurring proofs of the marvellous ways of God in His dealings with the souls of men.

The life of St Gertrude which is here given to the public is proof, were proof needed, of this commonplace of spiritual writers. That a nun vowed to the humility of the cloistered life should have been chosen by our Lord as the instrument whereby He would reveal to the world the mystery, till then hidden, of the love of His Sacred Heart for men, is but one of many such mysterious events of which the lives of so many of the Saints are full. Her own sweet unworldly character, her simplicity, her quiet uneventful life, so uneventful, that is to say, in stirring incident or dramatic interest, but so full of wonders in its hidden beauty, would appeal perhaps to but few, though, told as her history is here told, it will be felt to possess a charm and character all its own ;

* Ps. lxxvii. 36.

† Col. iii. 11.

and, like all the saints whom the Church proposes to us for veneration and imitation, St Gertrude's life must surely claim and merit our deepest study. But there is another reason why our Saint deserves to be better known, loved more fervently, honoured more abundantly, and that is because of the high privilege which was hers, of being to the Church the mouthpiece of the abundant mercies of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to us poor sinners. To Saint Gertrude belongs this glory; this is her claim to the love and devotion of the Church.

There had been, of course, from the beginning of Christian history, an unceasing study of the love of Christ for men, and God's servants in every age had studied, lived, and died for this, that they "*might be able to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, to know also the charity of Christ which surpasseth all knowledge.*"* But of specific devotion to our Lord's Divine Heart, as the seat and symbol of His love and compassion, there are not many traces before the days of St Gertrude. One, St Paulinus of Nola, may be taken as a witness from early days. In a letter to Sulpicius Severus,† he writes as follows:—"Every one humble of heart proceeds from the very Heart of Christ."

One or two indications, rarely precious from their

* Eph. iii. 18, 19.

† Quoted in the *Rambler*, 1857, ii. p. 74. Letter xxiii.

origin and antiquity, are found in the writings of the early Christian centuries, which show us, dimly and obscurely perhaps, but unmistakably, that Jesus Christ, "yesterday, and to-day, and the same for ever" * had, even from the beginning, inspired some who were His with the thought which, in the latter days when faith and love were growing cold, was to fill the soul of St Gertrude, that our one hope lay in the love which His Sacred Heart for ever bears for us whom He has redeemed. But such indications are few; nay, even the revelation of the secrets of their devotion made to St Gertrude may be said to be as but the dawn of that fuller and more widespread enlightenment which the Church has revelled in since the days of Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque.† But it is certainly a fact that from St Gertrude's days we may trace a constantly growing tendency amongst saintly souls to give a more explicit worship, a more profound study, to the Sacred Heart. When we emerge from the age of the martyrs and the great doctors, we find St Gregory the Great applying the words of the Canticle "*Arise, my love, my beautiful one and come, my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the wall,*" ‡ to the soul's safe refuge, the

* Heb. xiii. 8.

† When this Preface was written by the late Dean Dolan, B. Margaret Mary had not been canonised; the same remark applies to B. Peter Canisius and B. John Eudes.

‡ Canticle ii. 14.

lance-pierced side of Christ. And we may trace the same idea in the writings of Rhaban Maur, Abbot of Fulda, in another Benedictine Rupert of Dentz, and in a still more famous writer, St Anselm of Canterbury, who in his tenth meditation on the Passion of Christ thus breaks forth: "What sweetness in His piercèd side! That wound has given us a glimpse of the treasure house of His goodness, that is to say, of the love of His Heart for us." And St Anselm was but one among many who in England knew and loved the Heart of Jesus, and by their writings and, doubtless, by their spoken words, inflamed the minds of many with the love which burned within their own souls. A little later on we find St Bernard of Clairvaux,* a saint filled with the love of God, speaking quite naturally of the Heart of Christ as the object of our adoration and the source of Divine mercy and compassion. His vast influence through the extension of the Cistercian Order which he helped so notably to popularise, spread the devotion all over Christendom and his fervour found many imitators among the monks whom he had attracted to the monastic life. No more conspicuous follower had St Bernard than our countryman, Gilbert of Holland, monk of Swineshead Abbey in Lincolnshire. This

* It is but fair to say that some critics question the authorship of these meditations. Quarracchi gives good grounds for attributing the *Vitis Mystica* not to St Bernard but to St Bonaventure.

admirable mystic in his twenty-first discourse on the Canticle of Solomon * speaks thus of the Sacred Heart: “‘*Come forth, come forth, O daughter of Sion,*’ and give thyself up to the love of this Heart. ‘*Thou hast wounded my Heart, O my beloved.*’ This wounded Heart shows the vehemence of His love. O Heart that hast deigned, so sweet art Thou, to manifest Thyself in beatings like to those of our hearts that we might give Thee love for love! What a marvel is this, my brethren! Shall we not call that soul blessed which pierces with the darts of its love the very Heart of our Lord Jesus Christ? *Vulnerasti cor meum, Vulnerasti cor meum.* Weary not of wounding thy Beloved, O faithful Spouse! Let thy acts of love be as darts to pierce Him. Happy shalt thou be if thy arrows be firm fixed in His Heart, if His Heart be the object of thy love, if thy gaze be ever centred on Him. Sweet wound, whence cometh all our strength! The woman touched but the hem of His garment and Jesus felt virtue go forth from Him: much more will grace go forth to thee if by thy love His Heart be wounded.”

Thus we see how in some sort the leadings of the Holy Spirit were preparing the way for the fuller revelation of the devotion to the Sacred Heart which

* Printed among the works of St Bernard; ed. Migne, 184, 113. Among the friends and followers of St Bernard in whose writings we find traces of the devotion may be named William de St Thierry († c. 1150), and Blessed Gueric, Abbot of Igny († c. 1160).

was to be the chief feature of St Gertrude's life. Doubtless, with a more exact and intimate acquaintance with the mystical writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we might indicate more clearly the actual points of contact between the religious devotional life of those times and the spiritual environment of the nuns of St Gertrude's community. There is evidence enough in her history of the influence of the monastic revival among the children of St Bernard upon the nuns of Helfta ; perhaps it was by them that the first seeds of this devotion were planted in her soul.*

Nor was St Gertrude the only contemplative to whom this inner sanctuary of Divine love was laid open. The writings of her fellow religious St Mechtilde show us that she too shared the secret of St Gertrude's sanctity. It is told of St Lutgard, a Benedictine nun, that our Lord exchanged His own Sacred Heart for hers. The lives of Blessed Ida of Louvain, and Blessed Elizabeth of Spaldeck give us glimpses of their knowledge of this new mystery, and the wonderful life of that great light of the later middle age, St Frances of Rome, completes the tale of the spread of this devotion among the daughters of St Benedict and St Scholastica.

* *Author's note to 2nd edition.* Some writers claim that St Gertrude was a Cistercian, *i.e.*, a religious following the rule of St Benedict according to the interpretation instituted by St Bernard, but this suggestion remains so far (1925) without conclusive proof.

Whencesoever derived, they were not long in springing up and bearing goodly fruit; fruit still abundant, giving health to the children of God. Of the wondrous effects of the love of Christ's Heart in the soul of our Saint the following pages are eloquent; of the ever-growing knowledge of the devotion to our Lord's Heart, of her visions and ecstasies, of her untiring desire to make all around her share her own delight in this new unfolding of the Divine Spouse's love and mercy, every chapter of her life will tell.

With St Gertrude the Church's devotion to the Sacred Heart enters on a new phase. Though, unfortunately, the constant wars which harassed her country and more than once almost annihilated the convent in which she had been professed have deprived us, we cannot doubt, of much that would have told us of the direct influence of the Saint on the religious thought of her contemporaries, there is yet abundant evidence that, from the date of her death, about the year A.D. 1302, the knowledge and devotion which had been hers were ever on the increase. Naturally we find this to be the case amongst the monks and nuns of her own religious rule; and among the older Benedictines and their white-robed brethren and sisters of the Cistercian branch of the Order the cultus of the Sacred Heart is constantly being manifested. Nor was it confined

to them. No religious family in the Church gave itself more completely to the contemplative life than that of St Bruno, and it is precisely among the Carthusians that we can trace, from the beginning of the fourteenth century, a line of writers whose words and prayers might almost seem to anticipate the devotional utterances of our own days. Among them figure some of the greatest of mediæval mystics. Ludolf of Saxony, who died in 1378, was their leader; he and Henry de Kalkar, born in 1328, his contemporary, may have derived their knowledge and love of the Sacred Heart from those who had known St Gertrude before her happy death. Other names in this catena of Carthusian ascetics who handed on the tradition of Ludolf of Saxony were Nicholas Kempf, Dominic of Treves (1461), James de Clusa (1466), and Denis the Carthusian (1471), the best known of them all. So sure a hold had the devotion to the Sacred Heart taken among the children of St Bruno, that in 1474 that devout symbol of God's love was carved on the keystone of the cloister arch at the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse, and the same sacred symbol was depicted over each cell of the Charterhouse of Cologne.*

*For the share taken by the Carthusians in the devotion to the Sacred Heart, see *Ancient Devotions to the Sacred Heart by Carthusian Monks of the 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th Centuries*. London: Burns & Oates. Some valuable notes on the early cultus of the Sacred Heart among the Benedictines were printed in the *Messenger des Fidèles* in 1885, (Maredsous).

To complete the tale of this devotion in one Order alone we must recall the names of Peter Dorland (1507), Peter Bloemenvenna (c. 1536), Lansperg (1539), a writer whose works are full of it, and who advocated its representation in art, and Anthony Volmar, a contemporary. Among the Spanish Carthusians may be named John of Torralba (1578), John Anadon (1682), Prior of Saragossa, and Anthony de Molina, monk of Miraflores near Burgos (1605). And to quote but one among many of the Dominicans whose writings show that they too were sharers in the growing devotion, hear the words of Blessed Henry Suso: "O Jesus, remember that cruel lance which pierced Thy Heart: That Heart, wounded and opened for us, has become for us a fountain of living water." Among the Canons Regular we may name Richard of St Victor, among the Franciscans St Bonaventure, and Eckbert of Schonan (1165), Peter of Blois, Archdeacon of Bath (1200), and a few more, as writers who were familiar with the devotional ideas then coming into vogue.

In England, as we have seen, there had been some beginnings of a knowledge of the love of the Sacred Heart even before St Gertrude's time, but after her death the evidence quickly begins to accumulate of a more widespread familiarity with the growing devotion. Thus William Langland's well known poem (1362 or

1367) *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, has one or two allusions which may here be quoted.

“Shotten ayein with shot
 Goddes Herte and his nayles
 Many a sheef of othes
 And brode hoked arwes
 And hadden almost Unitee
 And holynesse a-down.”

The sins of men were as broad hooked arrows wounding the Heart of God.*

It was about this time too that Mother Juliana, an anchoress at Carrow, a Benedictine Convent at Norwich, was writing her sixteen revelations of Divine Love (c. 1373). Once our Lord appeared to her and “with sweet rejoicing showed His Blessed Heart cleft in twain; and with His rejoicing, He shewed to my understanding in part the blissful Godhead.”†

From a manuscript poem of the fifteenth or sixteenth century we cull the following prayer:

“And for that like delful knife
 That through thine Heart gan wende
 Help me that am sinful in life
 And give me the bliss without end.”

* *The Vision and Creed of Piers Plowman*, edited by Thomas Wright, ii. p. 433; ed. 1887.

† Some of the English examples here given have already appeared in an article which I contributed to the *Dublin Review* some fourteen years ago, entitled *Devotion to the Sacred Heart in Mediæval England*.

Another indication of the growing popularity of the new devotion amongst our countrymen, is the oath which Dr. Thomas Gascoigne, Chancellor of the University of Oxford, tells us was only too common in his day in England; "*Per Cor Christi preciosum:*" By Christ's dear Heart.*

Another evidence of the ever-widening knowledge of the devotion to the Sacred Heart which followed soon after St Gertrude's death is its constant appearance in religious art in many parts of Europe. There can be no doubt that such an outward presentment presupposed a familiarity with and a love of the sacred symbol, and the evidence which the desecrated churches and mutilated shrines of England afford make it abundantly clear that in this country, at any rate, religious minded people were at great pains to express in terms of art the faith which was in them. In the stained glass of their churches, in the sculptured bosses of their cathedrals and cloisters, on their chantry chapels and church towers, in the brasses of their tombs we find the Sacred Heart constantly depicted.† Scarce a county but can show

* See his work, *Loci e libro veritatum*, (a sort of common-place book); edited by James E. Thorold Rogers. Clarendon Press, 1881.

† The following list does not in any way pretend to be an exhaustive one of the old English churches where representations of the Sacred Heart may be seen to this day. Special attention

dozens of examples, and to anyone with eyes to see nothing can be plainer than the love our forefathers bore, even as we do, to the Heart of our all-merciful Saviour. "Our faith through our prayer" expresses a well known truth: so too does the phrase "Our faith through our art"; and its expression in the case of the devotion we are studying is, all things considered, most ample and convincing.

The quiet spreading, in all parts of the Church, of devotion to our Lord's Sacred Heart may be traced in the spiritual writings of men of every country almost, and of every religious order. Among the Benedictines (to take but one example) who had inherited the spirit of St Gertrude, and whose writings breathe her own tender devotion to the Sacred Heart

is called to a few of the more prominent examples which have come under my notice in churches and books:—Bath Abbey, western doorway; Blakeney, Norfolk; Bradford, Wilts; Bristol Cathedral; Bury St Edmunds, St Mary's Church; Cambridge, in cloister of St Radegond's nunnery, now Jesus College; Chewton Mendip on western tower; Christchurch, Hants, in chantry chapel of Blessed Margaret Pole; Cobham, Kent; Denney Camb; tablet to Abbess Throckmorton, now at Coughton-Dunster, Som. on font. Evesham, All Saints; Fladbury; Glastonbury, in St John's Church, and in St Benedict's; Graveney, Kent; Hadleigh, Suffolk; Higham Ferrers; Hinton, Kent; Hitchin, Herts; Kessingland, near Lowestoft; London, Salt Tower and Beauchamp Tower, in the Tower; Malling Abbey, Kent, on outer gateway; Malvern (Great), in porch, tiles and glass. Michaelchurch, Herefordshire; Milton Clevedon,

may be mentioned the Spaniard, Garcia Cisneros, of Montserrat (1510); Louis of Blois, Abbot of Liesse (1556), Dom Haeften of Affligheim (1648), and his contemporary, D. Gregory Corner, Abbot of Gottweih in Austria. Among English ascetical writers incomparably the most celebrated was Father Augustine Baker (1575-1641), and his fervent invocation of the Sacred Heart may be found among the prayers and devout exercises at the end of the well-known compendium of his teaching, called *Sancta Sophia*, the *Book of Holy Wisdom*.*

Among the many pioneers of Blessed Margaret Mary there are few whose history presents more interesting features than that of the Venerable Jeanne Guillen, an Augustinian nun of the monastery of Orihuela in Spain. Throughout her religious life she had spent herself in

Som; Milton Abbey, Dorset; Mold, Flint; Ottery St Mary (1544), St Osyth's Priory, gateway, and Parish Church; Shaftesbury, St. Peter's; Stamford, *Domus Dei*; Stanford Dingley, Berks; South Reverne, Cornwall, pew ends; Tewkesbury Abbey, Trewleigh, Devon; Wells Cathedral, E. Cloister and the Sugar chantry; Westminster Abbey, Islip's Chantry; Whitby Abbey, glass from; Winchester Cathedral, boss over high altar; Windsor, in North choir aisle, South nave aisle, and in front of the Royal stall in the Choir; Woodspring Priory, Somerset. In Scotland the Sacred Heart is depicted in Glasgow Cathedral; Dunblane; St Giles', Edinboro'; Haddington, etc. In Ireland, on a few tombs, and on late mediæval chalices.

* See *Devout Exercises on the Passion*, published in 1657, sixteen years after F. Baker's death.

promoting the devotion to the Sacred Heart in her community, and dying in the odour of sanctity on June 2, 1607, the initial steps were taken to procure her beatification. The Bishop of Orihuela (or as the See is sometimes called, Alicante Segorbe, in the province of Valencia) instituted the preliminary diocesan process on her life, virtues and miracles, and despatched the document to Rome. The messenger to whom they were entrusted never returned, and no one could tell what had become of the process. Meanwhile the Roman authorities refused to consider the case until the results of the diocesan investigation had been submitted to their examination. Things continued in this state for over two and a half centuries when a nun in the same community tried to stir up among her sisters some enthusiasm for their saintly predecessor's cause. Nothing came of it at the time ; the same old answer was always returned : the diocesan process must first be produced. At length, wearied out by the zealous importunity of the nun in question, her Superior forbade her to speak of the matter again, or to take any further steps to seek for the missing document. Nothing daunted, the good sister tried again on the 1st January, 1886, but the Prioress put her off till the Epiphany, and then again sharply reproved her and told her to leave the matter alone. Six months later, on June 15th, the nun renewed her request and this time not in vain, for the Prioress,

probably to be rid of her, simply said, "Go." So, taking a sister to help her, she proceeded to the archive room, where together they turned over box after box of old documents. At last the assistant held up a sort of bag or cushion filled with papers, which, on examination, proved to be the long lost episcopal process. The community was at once summoned to the choir, the Te Deum was sung in thanksgiving, and the documents were forwarded to Rome. At length on June 2, 1896, the Pope signed the paper appointing a commission for the introduction of the cause of this long forgotten servant of the Sacred Heart, whose name we may hope to see one day in the calendar of the saints.*

From Catholic France comes another of the modern pioneers of the popular devotion of these latter years. Jeanne of St Matthew Deleloe, whose name promises to be better known in the future than it has been in the past, was born in the little town of Fauquemberques in Artois in 1604. † Endowed with all manner of virtues even from her childhood, she felt a strong attraction to the monastic life, and entered the then newly established (1612) Benedictine convent of Our Lady and St Peter, in her

* Battandier. *Annuaire Pontifical Catholique*, p. 520. Paris, 1901.

† *Une mystique inconnue du XVII. Siècle—La mère Jeanne de Saint Mathieu Deleloe*. Par D. Bruno Destrée, O.S.B. Desclée, 1905. A new edition is in preparation at Maredsous, 1925.

native town. Forced by the wars which were then incessantly making that part of France unsafe, the community migrated to Poperinghe on June 26, 1635, and, after much suffering and poverty, were definitely established in that place, and there the community still flourishes. In its early days, when Mère de S. Mathieu was its prioress, nothing could exceed the zeal and charity of the religious who peopled its humble cloisters, though their lot was one of the direst poverty ; and the mainstay of their lives of prayer and penance was the example set them by their beloved Mother. And her spirit of faith and fervour, her supernatural courage and unquenchable thirst for the greater glory of God came from the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Her "Communications" as she modestly called them, that is to say, the simple records of her interior life penned by the command of her spiritual directors, are full of the revelations made to her by her Divine Spouse on this subject. Indeed some have declared that her "Communications" deserve to be ranked with the similar soul-records which we have inherited from St Gertrude and St Theresa. Certainly her name cannot be forgotten in the history of the gradual unfolding to the world of the devotion to the Heart of our Lord.

And now another figure comes before us, a veritable

apostle of the Sacred Heart, the Blessed John Eudes.*

This holy priest, a native of Normandy, was born in 1601, joined the Oratory of Cardinal Bérulle, received the priesthood in Paris in 1625, and soon began to manifest that untiring zeal and charity which, in due course, raised him to such eminent sanctity. The foundation of the Order of our Lady of Charity of Refuge (which in turn has given rise to the Congregation of the Good Shepherd, of Angers,) would alone have made him worthy of our reverence. But in connection with our present investigation there is another aspect of his work which cannot be overlooked. To him the Church is indebted for the first public recognition of the devotion, ever growing, which so many holy men and women were practising in all parts of Christendom. Whilst founding his institute of Our Lady of Charity for the reformation of the fallen, he was spreading everywhere the devotion to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary with which his name is indissolubly associated.

In 1645 the Blessed Eudes began the devotion privately in the two religious congregations which he had founded, namely, his nuns of the Refuge and his Missionary Priests. In 1659 he composed a Proper

* See an article by the late F. Bertrand Wilberforce, O.P., in the *Month*, 1891—*An Apostle of the Sacred Heart in the Seventeenth Century*.—See footnote, Page xi.

Office for the feast of the Sacred Heart; in 1670 and 1671 he obtained from seven bishops permission to celebrate a special feast of the same with the office which he had composed. "We allow," writes one of them, Mgr. de la Vieuxville, Bishop of Rennes, "the priests of the aforesaid Congregation to celebrate solemnly every year, on August 31st, the feast of the Adorable Heart of our Lord Jesus Christ, with an octave, and to employ a proper Mass and Office for this festival, and to keep the same Office the first Thursday of every month. March 8, 1670."

"This," says Fr. Wilberforce, "is the earliest document authorising in the Church the worship and the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus." Father Eudes' work is thus summed up by Cardinal Pitra in his "Life of Rev. F. Libermann." "It would be difficult in France to speak of the works inspired by the Sacred Heart without thinking of the Rev. Fr. Eudes, who deserves to be called the Apostle of the Sacred Heart. He was the first, and during the whole of his life the active propagator of the New Devotion: he dedicated to the Sacred Heart the Congregation he founded, he began the feasts, composed the Offices, printed manuals of the devotion, he built chapels and churches in its honour, erected innumerable confraternities of the Sacred Heart, and gave the impetus to the movement that has since spread through the whole Church. Father Eudes is the

teacher who gave a scientific precision to the New Devotion, explained its theological foundation, answered the attacks of its enemies, pointed out the manner in which the Devotion should be practised, and composed hymns and prayers for its liturgical celebration, instituted feasts and societies, obtained letters of authorisation from Bishops, and Briefs from the Apostolic See, in order to spread and maintain the New Devotion. He was the ambassador of the Sacred Heart to the people and their pastors, to the princes of the world and of the Church."

England, so conspicuous in happier days for its zeal in this devotion, was faithful to it during the persecution which came upon it during the 16th and 17th centuries. Its prison walls, as in the Tower of London, testify to the hope and comfort which some, at least, of its victims found in the Sacred Heart, fount of all compassion, which they roughly carved upon its walls. And when the sturdy men of the North rose in righteous rebellion against the enemies of their faith, their banner bore upon it the same beloved Symbol. And again, when Lady Mary Percy, daughter of their leader, the martyred Earl of Northumberland, established at Brussels the first abbey of Benedictine nuns set up since the destruction of the English Monasteries, she chose for the arms of her community a cross emblazoned with the Sacred Heart; and when its more public cultus was spread over Europe

the first altar in its honour to be set up in Belgium was in the abbey church of the English Benedictine nuns.

In many parts of the country we can find evidence of the fidelity with which our persecuted ancestors kept up their old religious practices. On many a chalice and pyx which time has spared as a reminder of those heroic days, on the worn embroidery of venerable chasubles and chalice veils, sanctified by confessors and martyrs in those cruel times, we find the Sacred Heart depicted as it had been set forth before the bursting of the dark storm of religious revolt. Nay, in one case at least, at East Hendred, the seat of the Eystons, the manor house, rebuilt towards the end of the 17th century (1661), displayed on one of its gables the Sacred Heart of our Lord, and on another the sword-pierced Heart of His Immaculate Mother. Nor, strange as it may seem, were the English Catholics alone in their love of the Sacred Heart, for a famous Puritan divine, Thomas Goodwin, who was born in 1600, and died eighty years later, having in the course of his ministry attended Oliver Cromwell on his death-bed, published in 1642 a book on the Sacred Heart which quickly became popular. Reprinted in 1643, 1645, 1651 and 1681, and by John Wesley in 1819, it may still be known to a few among the more devout of our non-Catholic contemporaries. Its title is an attractive one, "The Heart of Christ in Heaven towards Sinners on Earth, or a treatise demonstrating the gracious

disposition and tender affection of Christ in His Humane Nature, now in Glory, unto His members under all Sorts of Infirmities either of Sin or Misery." A Latin translation of this work, printed at Heidelberg in 1658, still further spread the knowledge of the devotion among the non-Catholic population of Germany. But this was not the first work on the subject. Mathias Hejnal, who died in 1644, had published in 1629 "a Book for them that love the Sacred Heart of Jesus," and Gaspar Drusbicki, a Pole (1662), wrote a work called *Meta Cordium Cor Jesu*. (The Heart of Jesus the goal of our hearts.)*

As the time for the revelation of the devotion through Blessed Margaret Mary drew near, we find more and more devout souls inspired with anticipatory desires to make the Sacred Heart better known. Among the Jesuits such were St Aloysius, St Alfonsus Rodriguez and Canisius †; the Ven. Marina d'Escobar and John of Avila in Spain; at Vannes in Brittany, Père Huby (1693), a great preacher of the devotion, and the saintly servant the Bonne Armelle, (1671); and in Canada, the holy Ursuline, Ven. Mary of the Incarnation, who was led to this form of piety in 1630. She died in 1672.

And to come still closer to Blessed Margaret Mary. In

* See *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique: Vacaut et Mangenot*. Paris: Letouzey, 1908. It would be interesting to trace, if possible, Goodwin's indebtedness to previous publications.

† See footnote, Page xi.

her own Order of the Visitation she had the example and well-known influence of its founder, St Francis de Sales, whose words, that his nuns should be called the servants of the Sacred Heart, read almost like a prophecy. Certain it is that among the Visitandines there was an ever growing devotion to the Sacred Heart from the beginning of their institute, as we may see in the lives of Mère l'Huillier, and Anne Margaret Clement (1661), and especially of Blessed Jane Bénigne Gorjos, of Turin (1692), who foretold the near approach of the day when our Lord's Sacred Heart should become more widely known and loved.

Thus when the Ven. Père de la Colombière, S.J., came to England, he found both among Catholics and non-Catholics a knowledge and love of the Devotion which was to occupy so large a place in his thoughts and prayers during the remainder of his saintly life. But others had laboured before him and he was only entering on their labours when in 1677 he first preached publicly on the devotion to the Sacred Heart on the feast of Corpus Christi. Through his ministry it was that that vessel of election, the Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque, the humble Visitandine of Paray-le-Monial had learnt what had been known dimly by early martyrs and confessors, had been written of by Popes and Doctors, preached about in the chapter-houses of Monks, lain hid in the consecrated cloisters of saintslike Gertrude and Mechtilde,

honoured in the solitudes of contemplative Carthusians ; from him she was led to become one, the last, and in some sense the greatest, of those who, like our English forefathers, our martyrs and our confessors, bore witness before the world to the divine fulness of charity in the Heart of Jesus. With the more public manifestation of the Church's love and devotion to the Divine Word Whose infinite charity and compassion are symbolised in His Sacred Heart, and which was the grand mission of Blessed Margaret Mary, the work of St Gertrude and so many holy men and women, her own Founder, St Francis de Sales, among them, may be said to have culminated. The sanction of the Church by the public recognition of the devotion of the Sacred Heart and the institution of a solemn festival in its honour set its seal upon their faith and their labours in the cause of Him Who brings from His Treasure House new things and old. (Matt. xiii. 52).

D. GILBERT DOLAN, O.S.B.

THE PRIORY, LITTLE MALVERN,
FEAST OF ST GERTRUDE, *17th November, 1912.*

NOTE

The chief authority consulted for the following life of St Gertrude is the French translation of "Legatus Divini Amoris," edited by the Benedictine Fathers of Solesmes under the title "Le Héraut de l'Amour Divin."

St Gertrude was never formally canonized, as the term is now understood, but about two centuries and a half after her death, the beauty and value of her writings caused many holy and learned men to petition the Pope to rank her with the saints. The favour was granted, and ever since St Gertrude has been honoured on the altars of the Universal Church, her feast being kept on 15th November.

The Benedictines have the privilege of using an office specially composed in her honour, and they keep her feast on 17th November, the day on which she died, A.D. 1302.

The footnotes in this (2nd) edition are added by the kind permission of the Benedictines of Maredsous, who are responsible for the French translation of the Life of St Gertrude, (Notre Dame Series) in which these notes were inserted by the translator, a Benedictine of St. Scholastica's Abbey, Dourgne.

FEAST OF ST BENEDICT,

March 21st, 1925.

ST GERTRUDE THE GREAT

INTRODUCTION

“The just shall spring as the lily, and flourish for ever before the Lord.”

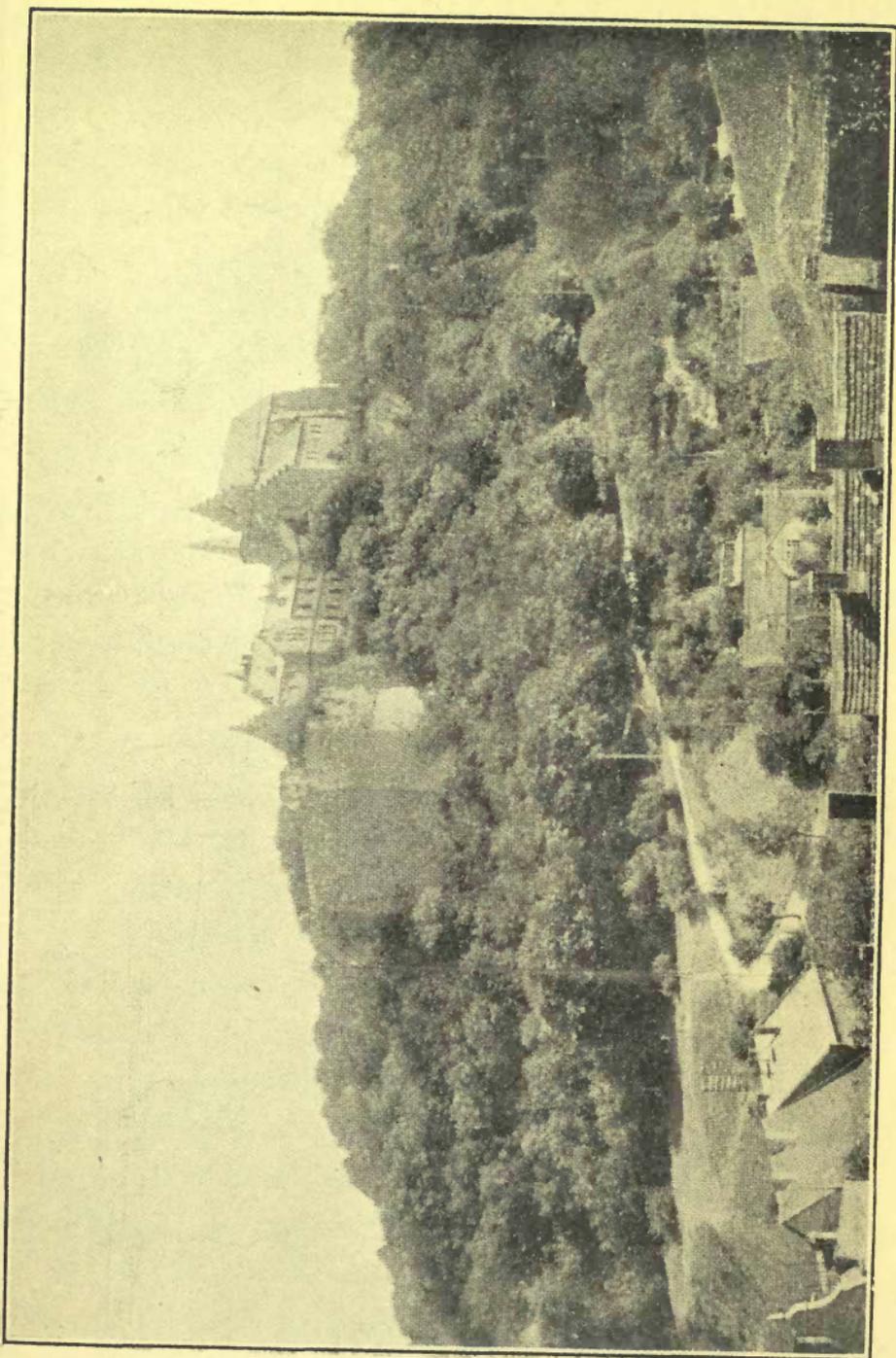
IN the Benedictine monastery of Helfta, near Eisleben in Saxony, there dwelt during the latter half of the thirteenth century, two of the greatest women saints the Church has ever produced—saints whose names are inseparably linked with the history of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of our Divine Lord. These were St Mechtilde and St Gertrude the Great. Of the former it will be possible to speak here only incidentally, as the intimate friend and confidante of the latter.

It may be interesting to dwell a little on the surroundings where St Gertrude passed her life, for she came to Helfta before she was five years old. Nearly two centuries after her death, Eisleben saw the birth of Martin Luther, of whom memorials abound in the city,

although it has kept no record of its Virgin Saints except the ruined monastery where they once lived.

The monastic church and the farm buildings still exist. The Lutherans, having removed the vaulting and lowered the roof of the church, used it as a granary. Its twenty-four lancet windows were blocked up with rough masonry, except the lights of the eastern gable, which probably separated the nuns' choir from the body of the church. At the extreme west the level of the ground rises about six feet, and being also separated from the nave, formed a sort of tribune for the use of the religious, or of distinguished guests. This portion has two windows in fifteenth century style likewise blocked up. Beneath it is a small crypt, opening to the north by pointed arches, probably the chantry of the Counts of Mansfeld who founded the monastery; perhaps also the chapel at the dedication of which St Gertrude tells us she assisted. If so, its building must have been begun in 1265, and it was dedicated to St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist.

The first foundation of Benedictines at Eisleben was made by Burchard, Count of Mansfeld in 1229, within the walls of his own castle, which stood amid the eastern spurs of the Harz mountains. Five years later the nuns, for the sake of greater quiet and seclusion, removed to Rödersdorf, a small town built on a tributary of the Elster. Here they remained during the



SCHLOSS MANSFIELD
(Where Count Burchard brought the Benedictines)

lifetime of their first abbess, Cunegonde. In 1251 she was succeeded in her office by Gertrude of Hackeborn, who, though only nineteen years of age, was unanimously elected, for "she bore in her heart the wisdom of old age and transcended her years by her ways," as is said of her holy father St Benedict.

Three years previously her sister Mechtilde—St Gertrude's friend—had been received into the same house, and their brothers presented to Abbess Gertrude the domain of Helfta, about a mile outside Eisleben, on which to build a more commodious monastery. The removal took place in 1258, and thither in 1261 came the little Gertrude whose sanctity was destined to make Helfta a house dear to the Heart of God.

About forty years after St Gertrude's death, the buildings were pillaged by the soldiers of Albert of Brunswick, a usurping Prince-Bishop of Halberstadt, the neighbouring cathedral city. He did not shrink from setting fire to the monastery with his own hand; and though the damage done was not very considerable, it was sufficient indication of danger to determine the reigning Count of Mansfeld, whose daughter Luitgarde was their abbess, to transfer the community to a safer position within the walls of Eisleben.

Here a new monastery was built, known at first as Neu-Helfta, but now as Trud-Kloster, in honour of St Gertrude. The Benedictines took possession of their

new quarters in 1346; but Helfta still remained their property, and it is not known whether they took with them the remains of the religious buried in their former home. Thus it has come to pass that the site of St Gertrude's tomb is unknown.

For nearly two hundred years, God was served at Neu-Helfta in peace, but in 1525 the peasants of Saxony, revolting in the name of religious reform, pillaged and destroyed the monastery, burning all its chronicles and manuscripts. The abbess at that time was Catherine of Watzdorf, whose holy life drew upon her the persecution of Luther. He wrote a violent pamphlet against her and her nuns, and it was this document which had inflamed the peasantry against them.

The religious were turned out of their peaceful home amid scenes of violence and devastation, and no record is extant of their further history. St Gertrude seems to have had some foreknowledge of the persecution awaiting them, for she writes of God's purpose in allowing these trials, saying it was because He "wished to win for Himself the hearts of all the congregation which was His chosen garden, so that those who lived therein, harassed by trouble, might be purified from all carelessness in His service, and take refuge in His fatherly protection."

For a short time, in 1868, Helfta was again the home of Benedictines; but the iniquitous May laws of 1874 drove them out, and the property was only saved from

falling into non-Catholic hands by being bought in 1890, as a site on which it is hoped to build a church dedicated to St Gertrude.

A Church dedicated to St Gertrude the Great, was, however, begun in 1914, at Eisleben, not far from Helfta, by Joseph Westermann, dean and parish priest. It was consecrated on Nov. 15th, 1915, by the Right Reverend Henry von Hähling, Bishop of Paderborn."

Of the inner life of the monastery little need be said. The nuns lived under the rule of St Benedict, governed, subject to the direction of a provost, by an abbess elected by themselves with the approval of the bishop. Lay-brothers were attached to the monastery, and formed an essential part of the spiritual household, attending to the farm and other domestic work. Among the choir-sisters were many belonging to noble, and even royal families; a circumstance which, though it secured to the community powerful lay protectors, often embroiled the monastery in the deadly feuds that sprang up between these haughty and independent nobles.

On this account also there grew up, in most Benedictine foundations, "claustral" schools, where the daughters of princely houses were educated by the nuns, and taught not only the ordinary branches of school instruction, but also all that was required in those days for higher education. The whole course of study was

based upon solid principles of religion and piety ; and the little maidens, or "alumnae," clothed in miniature Benedictine habits, were carefully trained in all good behaviour, and in the manners and accomplishments suitable to their rank.

The instruction given to girls by the nuns was nothing inferior to that received by their brothers from the monks. Its attractiveness to the minds of studious youth is proved by the zeal with which the pupils devoted themselves to the acquisition of learning. Even St Gertrude was, for a time, carried away by the glamour of earthly knowledge, so that later on she never ceased reproaching herself for the ardour with which she had thrown herself into her studies ; to the detriment, for that period at least, of her close union with her Divine Lord. Such self-accusation and remorse for over-absorption in secular learning was not infrequent with the Saints of those happy Ages of Faith, when even those who were not saints had still a sense of the perspective between the value of the things of this world and those of the next.

Here, then, in this home of study and prayer did Gertrude's young soul grow and develop, helped by the friendship of St Mechtilde, and fashioned to the things of God by the watchful care of the holy abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn, under whose wise and gentle rule the religious at Helfta became almost a community of saints. Thus, too, St Gertrude was spared a trial

which is often allowed for the purification of God's servants, that, namely, of being misunderstood by their spiritual guides, as was, for instance, Saint Margaret Mary.

It was otherwise at Helfta. There, in peace and seclusion, Gertrude grew up as a fair lily in God's garden; and, after consoling her beloved abbess in her last illness, she was privileged to see her, at her death, admitted by our Lord into the happiness of heaven, whence she received from her a last encouragement in these words: "For you, my daughter, I have received a special reward from God, because I have urged you on with faithful affection in the affair which you know of, for the greater glory of God. The Heart of my beloved Lord Jesus, like a sweet toned musical instrument, plays for me, without ceasing, a canticle of love, and all the heavenly court pays me homage on this account."

CHAPTER I

HIDDEN WITH CHRIST IN GOD

FROM the very first God set His seal upon Gertrude, for she was born on the feast of the Epiphany, A.D. 1256, the day on which the Church commemorates the triple manifestation of Christ. Thus was her vocation foreshadowed ; for she was to be a " Herald of Divine Love ", manifesting in her own life and proclaiming by her writings the inexhaustible riches and tenderness of the Sacred Heart.

Her birthplace, and even her family name are unknown. She herself tells us that her home was at a great distance from Eisleben ; and from what she says we may infer that she was very early left an orphan. This would account for the tender age at which she was placed in the monastery, not being then five years old. Our Lord Himself arranged that she should be unhampered by any earthly ties, in order that her life might be wholly hidden with Him in God. From the

moment when she put on her little Benedictine habit, and became an *alumna*, or scholar, in the monastery, her birth and parentage were forgotten ; and she came to be remembered only as the favourite of the Sacred Heart, the lowly lover of a God who had chosen her as His specially beloved spouse.

Endowed as she was with many gifts of mind and heart, Gertrude must have been a very winning child ; and the nuns spoke of her familiarly as Truda or Trutta. By her quick intelligence and the diligent use of her talents, she easily surpassed her companions in their studies, and was allowed to go through the whole course from grammar to philosophy. So thorough was her mastery of the latter subject that, later on, her superiors did not hesitate to allow her to pass to theology ; though in this branch her knowledge was rather infused than acquired, the Holy Ghost becoming Himself her instructor.

In the beginning of her education, Gertrude, like other little scholars of that time, had to depend almost entirely on oral teaching, for books were rare, and the manuscripts might have been injured if passed from hand to hand. As she grew older, she was instructed in the art of copying and illuminating passages from Holy Scripture and other writings. She became very proficient in classical studies and wrote Latin fluently, as is evident from the account she has left, in that

language, of the graces and supernatural favours bestowed upon her by God.

It is also known that the saint had a good voice, and such was her skill in ecclesiastical music that, on the death of the Abbess Gertrude, when St Mechtilde* was unable, through illness, to conduct the solemn dirge sung for her by the nuns in choir, Gertrude took her place in this sad but consoling task, and filled it honourably and well. In the ordinary chanting of the Divine Office, too, she took particular pleasure in rendering each psalm or antiphon so perfectly that she was selected by St Mechtilde to assist in training the younger religious.

That Gertrude might use her great mental gifts for the glory of God, she was allowed, after her noviceship, to devote herself in a special way to higher studies. Her learning became famous far beyond the walls of her own monastery, and many came even from distant parts to consult her on difficult subjects. Nor was she in the least tempted to vain glory, for she was firmly persuaded that light was given to her not for herself but for others. The one object of her life was God and the salvation of souls; she thought of herself merely as a channel of divine grace.

Speaking of the marvellous favours she had received

* St Mechtilde, the Domna Cantrix, was named, on account of her beautiful voice, "The Nightingale of Christ."

from God, the saint notes especially this one: that whoever with a good will, right intention, and humble confidence should make known to her his spiritual needs, would never leave her without being both edified and consoled. "In this also Thou hast most suitably supplied for my indigence," she adds with characteristic humility, "for, alas! by my useless words I have wasted the talent Thou didst so liberally bestow upon me. But now I may gain some merit by what I share with others."

From Gertrude's entrance into the monastery, however, until she was twenty-five, her life was not marked exteriorly by anything extraordinary; it flowed on peacefully like that of any other good religious. —What she calls her "conversion" took place on 27th January, 1281, as will be related. At that date she gave herself up completely to the workings of divine grace. Gertrude's soul was henceforth for eight years inundated with marvellous graces and supernatural favours, but it was not until Maundy Thursday, 25th March, 1289, that she began to commit to writing these heavenly communications; and then she acted only in obedience to a direct inspiration of the Holy Ghost.

In 1292 Gertrude took part in the election of the third Abbess of Helfta, Sophia of Mansfeld. The imperial throne was vacant at the time, owing to the death of Rudolf of Hapsburg in the previous year; and

the community offered up fervent prayers, not only for the prosperity of the state, but also for the preservation of their monastery from political disturbances. On 5th May, the election of a new emperor took place at Frankfort, and its result was revealed to Gertrude at Helfta. She told her abbess that, contrary to the general expectation, the claims of Albert, son of Rudolf, had been set aside, and that Adolf of Nassau had been declared emperor. The saint added, moreover, that before long Adolf would perish by the hand of his rival. Six years later the prediction was fulfilled.

The task of writing became too laborious for Gertrude during the last years of her life; but she continued to dictate the account of her supernatural lights and favours in order to complete what she had written, working at it constantly in spite of much suffering and great weakness. Even before her death her writings were examined by eminent theologians; and the intercourse they had with her upon this subject left them astonished and edified; so that, says the chronicler, "they would gladly have given their lives to attest the reality of her mission."

When her books were all completed and the work entrusted to her by the Sacred Heart was accomplished, Gertrude cheerfully prepared for death, and passed peacefully from this world on 17th November, 1302. Scanty as are the records of her exterior life,

and sublime as are the descriptions of her visions and raptures, she yet left an example of daily correspondence to ordinary graces for the encouragement of even the lowest of Christian souls.

Gertrude did not acquire her great purity of heart and lowliness of spirit without effort. In the early days of her religious life she was almost carried away by her ardour for study, finding in it such delight that she sometimes shortened the time of prayer. But God, who was watching over her perfection, would not permit this state of things to continue. He allowed her mind to be overwhelmed with darkness, so that she knew not where to turn for comfort; and even in her spiritual exercises, to which she was always faithful, she found no solace. When this spiritual desolation had lasted for about a month, our Lord deigned to come Himself to console her.

At the hour of Compline on the Tuesday before the feast of the Purification, in the dusk of the evening, Gertrude was on her way to the choir. Meeting a sister, she bent her head in the customary salute. On raising her eyes again she saw before her our Lord under the form of a youth of delicate beauty, who said to her, "Your salvation is at hand; why are you consumed with grief? Have you no counsellor that you are so changed by sadness?"

Then it seemed to the saint that, without knowing

how she got there, she was in her own place in the nuns' choir, where the vision continued. As she knelt in her stall she heard the words, "I will save you; have no fear," while, as if to ratify the promise, her heavenly visitor clasped her right hand. He added, "You have licked the dust with My enemies and found but a few drops of honey amidst the thorns; return now to Me and I will receive you and pour out upon you the torrent of My delights." At these words Gertrude looked up and beheld between herself and our Lord a thorny hedge extending to right and left as far as she could see; so high and prickly that she could not possibly get to the other side.

As she hesitated, consumed with the desire of approaching her Lord, He put out His hand, and in a moment lifting her without difficulty, placed her by His side. As He did so, Gertrude saw on this hand one of the sacred wounds, and she knew for certain Who it was that had come to correct and comfort her. "By these and other illuminations," she writes, "Thou didst enlighten and soften my mind, detaching me from an inordinate love of literature and from all my vanities, so that I came to sacrifice those things which formerly attracted me; and all that was not Thee, O God of my heart, seemed vile to me, Thou alone being pleasing to my soul."

Thus all earthly learning became to her as loss, in

order that, like St Paul, she might gain the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ her Saviour. In another place she thanks our Lord for the loving way in which He helped her to subdue what she calls her "unconquerable self-opinionatedness" by infusing new light and strength into her soul.

From the time of this vision onwards, Gertrude found rest to her soul, and the yoke of religious life became sweet and light. Henceforth her faults never disturbed her peace of mind; nor were they great enough to hinder our Lord from showering graces upon her. Often, when she received Holy Communion He appeared visibly to her, sometimes smiling, sometimes severe, according as she had been more or less watchful in correcting herself.

We have Gertrude's own testimony that for the rest of her life our Lord's presence with her made itself sensibly felt whenever she turned to Him in prayer, even though it were only for a moment; with the single exception of a period of eleven days, when, in punishment for a worldly conversation, He withdrew from her.

CHAPTER II

THE DIVINE OFFICE

THE world, in this twentieth century, cannot understand the vocation to a religious life of any kind, still less to that of contemplation. In active orders, the work done speaks for itself, and the power for good of a well-organised congregation is self-evident. But a hidden life of prayer and sacrifice is apt to be stigmatised as selfish and unprofitable, more especially in lands where heresy and religious intolerance have resulted in wide-spread ignorance or indifference about everything relating to God and the soul.

A contemplative order, such as that to which St Gertrude belonged, makes the praise of God its special object. "No man," says Bishop Hedley, "is ever worshipped. It is only the Infinite, the Almighty, the All-Holy that can be praised with the hymn of adequate worship. But it is just this which makes it

a duty." This singleness of aim, in a life devoted solely to the worship of God, is precisely what makes it inexplicable to most non-Catholics, and a puzzle sometimes even to those who ought to know better.

In reality nothing is simpler. St Benedict says in his rule: "In every place we are the servants of one Lord and the soldiers of one King." Hence, Benedictine monks and nuns look upon themselves as the courtiers of the King, and their chief work is to sing His praise. The words: "We give Thee thanks for Thy great glory," express the whole spirit of their Order. They sanctify themselves after the example of their Divine Master, that so they may be less unworthy to intercede for the Church and for souls.

In a Benedictine convent seven hours, at least, are passed each day in prayer made in common, which includes Holy Mass, the chanting or recitation of the Divine Office, meditation, and a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. "Nor is this psalmody," continues Bishop Hedley, "the chant of a small body of unknown women; it is a part of that hymn of praise which the Universal Church perpetually sings to the Majesty of God . . . the constant prayer of the spouse of Christ, joined as it is to the constant prayer of Christ Himself, is the world's redemption and salvation."

St Gertrude knew this truth well, and she took special delight in chanting the Office in choir, "not

sparing the voice," as St Bernard has it. "I believe that it pleased Thee much when I chanted as loud as I could, and at each note fixed my attention on Thee, as one who has not learnt the chant by heart . . . fixes his mind on his book. Still, I know that I have been negligent in this and in other things which concerned Thy glory, and I confess this to Thee, O Father of Mercy, asking pardon through the bitter Passion of Thy blameless Son, Jesus Christ, in Whom Thou didst declare Thyself well pleased."

The holy virgin received special lights on the mystical meaning of the words of the sacred liturgy; and her divine Spouse often deigned to show Himself to her, or to speak with her during the hours she spent in chanting His praises; or when she lingered, after the other sisters had left the choir, to gain some time for quiet prayer.

Of this supernatural light and consolation Gertrude speaks as follows: "Often and often, and for this I render Thee thanks through the union of mutual love which reigns in the ever-adorable Trinity, I have experienced the sweetness of thy caress, so that while I sat in choir meditating, or reciting the Divine Office, or the Office of the Dead, I have often received, ten times or more during a single psalm, a kiss far surpassing in delight the most exquisite perfume or the sweetest honey. Often, too, I have noticed the loving

look Thou didst cast upon me, and felt in my soul the pressure of Thy embrace."

If the saint's language here, or elsewhere when it is quoted, seems exaggerated or draws comparisons from human things with what might be taken for daring or want of reverence, there are two points which must always be borne in mind. In the first place, God's love for each individual soul He has created, far transcends any love which one human being can bear to another, all human love being but a shadow of the Divine love God deigns to bestow on His creatures; and secondly, the intercourse of any soul with God is of so secret and spiritual a nature that it is exceedingly difficult to find words in which to express it. The same difficulty has been felt by many saints and holy persons, who have tried to leave a record of the marvels God has worked in their souls.

The Sisters whom Gertrude consoled and helped wrote down many of her explanations of passages in the psalms or other parts of the Liturgy. Thus the light vouchsafed personally to her more than eight hundred years ago is still helping those who read her *Revelations*. One or two examples of such passages will help to make this clearer.

From the response, "Behold the Lord, our Protector, cometh," sung on the second Sunday of Advent, Gertrude learned that anyone who strove earnestly to

desire with his whole heart the fulfilment of God's will in him, alike in prosperity and adversity, would, by God's grace, render to His Divine Majesty as much honour as is rendered to an earthly monarch when he is crowned with a royal diadem.

Again, from the words of Isaias, "Arise, stand up, O Jerusalem," she understood the advantage which the church militant derives from the devotion of the elect. For, when a soul full of love turns to God with her whole heart and, with a perfect will, desires to make reparation for all the dishonour done to Jesus Christ, she often appeases His anger, so that He is willing to pardon the sins of the whole world.

By those other words in which Isaias describes the character of the Messiah, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me: He hath sent me to heal the contrite of heart," our Lord taught Gertrude that He often sent some affliction to chosen souls, even if it were only something exterior, so that He might have an occasion of healing them. When the afflicted soul has drawn nearer to Him by reason of its suffering, He does not always take away the pain, but rather heals what is amiss in the soul by uniting it more closely to Himself.

During the office of a martyr, while the words, "if any man will come after Me, let him take up his cross and follow Me," were being chanted, the saint saw our Lord walking along a road made pleasant by trees

and flowers, but which, nevertheless, was very narrow and covered with thorns. Then she beheld a cross which went before Him and separated the thorns from one another, making the way wider and less difficult, while our Lord turned to those who were following Him and encouraged them with a sweet and loving countenance, saying, "Let him who would come after Me deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me." By this she understood that our temptations are our crosses, and that they differ for each one.

Once on Quinquagesima Sunday at the words of the second nocturn, "The angel of the Lord called Abraham," she learned that even as Abraham by raising his arm to strike Isaac, accomplished the sacrifice God had asked of him, so anyone who submits his will for God's sake to undertake some work which is painful, merits the grace of consolation now as a foretaste of what God will bestow upon him in the next world, where all are rewarded according to their works. From this same response Gertrude also understood that choirs of angels surround those who strive to serve God, to defend them from all evil. Nevertheless, God sometimes suspends this protection and permits the just to be tempted, in order that He may thereby reward them more gloriously ; since, when the help of God and His angels seems to be withdrawn, the victory over temptation is the result of their own efforts.

It would, however, be a mistake to suppose that Gertrude's soul was always flooded with sensible consolations during her hours of prayer. We have abundant evidence to the contrary. One day as she was reciting her office without much attention, she saw beside her the devil, who, mocking her, took up the verse of the psalm she was saying, cut short each word in it, and then exclaimed, "Truly, your Creator made a good choice in selecting you to receive the gift of speech! You can talk fluently enough when you speak to others, but when you address yourself to Him, you are in such a hurry that even in a single psalm you have omitted so many letters, so many syllables and so many words!"

Yet even this terrifying vision had its counterpart in another which gave immense consolation to the saint. God filled her one day with extraordinary fervour while she was reciting the office of one of the saints. Each word she uttered appeared to dart like an arrow from her heart into the Sacred Heart of our Lord, penetrating it deeply and causing it unspeakable satisfaction. Moreover, from the barb of each arrow came forth bright, starry rays which touched the saints and brought to each of them, but especially to the one whose feast was being celebrated, an increase of glory and joy; while from the wing of the arrow came forth, like drops of dew, an increase of grace for the living, and refreshment for the souls in purgatory.

Even the faults and frailties of Gertrude seemed to serve our Lord only as an excuse for lavishing fresh favours upon her. Once, when she was trying to attach a particular intention to each word and tone of the chant, and could not succeed, owing to the weakness of human nature, she exclaimed sadly, "What fruit shall I obtain from this exercise when I am so distracted?" Then our Lord with His own hands presented her with His Divine Heart, under the symbol of a burning lamp, saying "Behold, I present to the eyes of your soul My loving Heart, which is the organ of the most Holy Trinity. Present it to God with confidence, that it may supply all that you cannot do perfectly yourself, and thus all that you do will seem quite perfect in My sight. Even as a faithful servant is ever ready to execute the bidding of his master, so My Heart will be at your disposal to repair at any moment your faults and negligences."

Gertrude feared and wondered at this amazing goodness of our Lord, thinking it unbecoming that the adorable Heart which is the treasure-house of the Divinity should assist her, a miserable creature, supplying for her defects as a servant attends on his master. But our Lord consoled and encouraged her by this comparison, "If you have a beautiful and melodious voice, and take much pleasure in chanting, will you not feel displeased if another person, whose voice is harsh and unpleasant

and who can hardly utter a correct sound, wishes to sing instead of you, and insists on so doing? Thus My Divine Heart, understanding the frailty and inconstancy of human nature, desires with incredible ardour to be invited by your words, or at best by some sign, to take your place and perform for you what you are quite incapable of doing for yourself. And as My omnipotence can do all things, and My inscrutable wisdom knows all things, so also My love and kindness—the special properties of My Divine Heart—have but one desire, to do this work for you with loving ardour.”

Every one of the seven canonical hours of the Divine Office is associated with some instruction or revelation vouchsafed by our Lord to St Gertrude; but enough has been said to show how dear she was to the Heart of God, and to how intimate and sublime a union with Himself He raised her.

CHAPTER III

THE HOLY SACRIFICE OF THE MASS

TO assist at Holy Mass was another of Gertrude's daily duties, and, according to custom, at least two Masses were said every morning in the convent at Helfta. The first portion of Prime having been recited in the choir, the religious went to the chapter-room, where the martyrology of the day was chanted, and the office of Prime completed. They returned to the church almost immediately for a low Mass, during which, on the days appointed, they received Holy Communion. Later on in the morning, usually about nine o'clock, the Conventual Mass was celebrated, which, in large monasteries, is always sung, and is preceded by the chanting of Tierce, or Tierce and Sext, according to the requirements of the rubrics.

Many wonderful favours were granted to Gertrude during different parts of the Mass, or while she was

preparing to receive the Blessed Eucharist. Our Lord Himself instructed her in this mystery, teaching her its efficacy for all the needs of man.

One twenty-second of September, the Feast of St Maurice and his companions, Gertrude prayed thus during the Consecration of the Mass: "Lord, the mystery Thou dost now operate is so great and marvellous that I dare not even cast a look upon Thee. It is enough for me to hide myself in the depths of my lowliness, and there await my share of the salvation Thou dost work in the Mass for Thine elect."

But our Lord answered that she must co-operate with Him for the salvation of souls through the sacrifice of the Mass. "When a mother wants to do some intricate embroidery with silk and pearls," He said, "she sometimes lifts her child to an elevated place to hold her thread or beads, or to do her some other service. Even so, I have placed you in an eminent position to assist at this Mass. If you exercise your will in desiring to suffer all kinds of labour and pain in order that this Sacrifice, useful alike to the living and the dead, may work all its effects to the full, you will perfectly co-operate, as far as you can, with the accomplishment of My work for souls."

Another day, at the Elevation, as the saint offered the Host to the Eternal Father in satisfaction for her sins and negligences, she saw her soul being presented to the

Divine Majesty, and received with the same joy as that with which Jesus Christ was received when He offered Himself at the same moment on the altar. God the Father, looking at her as it were through His Divine Son, saw her clothed with His perfections, and in her "looked upon the face of His Christ."

While thanking God for this favour, she learned that every time anyone assisting at Mass raises his heart towards the Son of God offering Himself for the salvation of the world, God the Father looks upon him with the same complacency with which He regards the Sacred Host. Gertrude asked whether this favour would be lost if the person committed a sin, since on going from light into darkness one loses at once the benefit of the light. Our Lord replied, "No, for although the sin interposes, so to speak, a cloud between the sinner and the Divine light, yet My goodness will always leave him some ray of this light to guide him to eternal life, and this ray will increase each time he hears Mass or approaches the Sacraments."

Once, when Gertrude was ill, she was much grieved that she could not hear Mass in preparation for Holy Communion which was to be brought to her. She complained lovingly to our Lord, saying, "See, my dearest Saviour, this indisposition which Thou hast sent me, and no other cause, deters me from assisting at Holy Mass. How can I prepare myself to receive Thy blessed Body

and Blood, since the best preparation of all, it seems to me, is to assist at this great Sacrifice?"

To this our Lord deigned to reply, "Since you blame Me, listen and I will sing you a canticle, full of sweetness and love. Learn, first, that you have been bought with My Blood, and that the thirty-three years I worked on earth, in exile for you, were but an embassy to win you as My spouse, and let this thought serve as the first part of Mass.

"Then consider how you have received as a dowry the riches of My Spirit; for, if my Body endured great labours for your sake, My Soul also united you to itself in a most ineffable manner. This shall be the second part of the Mass.

"Learn, further, that you have been replenished with My Divinity, which can make you taste the purest spiritual delight, even while you are suffering great bodily pain. This will suffice for the third part of Mass.

"Understand, also, that you have been sanctified by My love, that of yourself you are nothing, and that whatever makes you pleasing in My sight, you have received from Me, and let these thoughts serve for the fourth part of Mass.

"Know, lastly, that you are united to Me in the sublimest manner; and, since all power is given to Me in heaven and on earth, nothing can prevent Me from

exalting you as much as I please ; for she who is united by marriage with the King must be called a queen and honoured as such. Be consoled, then, by meditating on these favours, and complain no more of being deprived of assisting at Mass."

On a similar occasion, when the saint was unable to be present in the church, she was rapt in ecstasy and saw our Lord Himself celebrating Mass, attended by the whole court of heaven. She was told to recite the Credo as a public profession of faith for the Church militant ; and at the Offertory, which was chanted by the saints, the Heart of our Lord became, as it were, a golden altar on which the guardian angels of men offered the prayers and good works of those committed to their care.

At the moment when the bell rang in the convent church for the Elevation, our Lord rose from His royal throne and presented His adorable Heart to God the Father, elevating it with His own Hands, and offering it in an ineffable manner for the wants of the whole Church. Thus was accomplished in heaven what was being operated on earth by the ministry of the priest.

The Pater Noster, like the Credo, was said by Gertrude in union with, and in memory of the silent aspirations by which the Sacred Heart prepared this prayer long before teaching it to men. Our Lord united her prayers to the desires and operations of

His Sacred Humanity and applied them to the needs of the Universal Church.

When the saint asked how she could communicate, He called her and united her to Himself so closely in a spiritual communion that she received all the fruit of a sacramental reception of His Body and Blood. Then all the saints rejoiced with Gertrude until the "Ite Missa est," when the Son of God extended His Hand over her in blessing, saying, "I bless you, O daughter of eternal light, with this special blessing, that henceforth anyone, whose good you desire, shall be as much benefited above others as Jacob was above Esau when he received his father's blessing."

Gertrude's love of God was eminently practical, leaving its impress on her daily life. One feast of St Matthew, after offering the chalice during the Elevation in thanksgiving for all God's favours to her, she reflected that her offering would be of little value if she did not prepare herself to endure all kinds of sufferings for Christ. So, ready to renounce her spiritual favours for God's sake, she offered herself to endure all that might promote His glory. Often, after this, she would interrupt her private hours of prayer to go and help her Sisters in their various needs, or to give advice and consolation to those who sought her from outside.

Overcome with weariness one morning during Mass,

she was aroused by the Elevation bell and saw our Lord planting a marvellous tree in her heart. She understood that to make it more fruitful she must pray for one who had been unkind to her, and she asked God to let her feel over again all the pain she had experienced so that the person who had hurt her might have more abundant graces.

At the hour of None on the same day our Lord again appeared to her, this time to ask her to gather for Him the fruit of the tree, teaching her thereby that it is not sufficient to suppress our dislike of those who displease or annoy us, but that we must actively seek occasions of doing them good.

It was probably during the last decade of the thirteenth century, between the death of the Abbess Gertrude Hackeborn in 1291 and that of St Mechtild in 1298, that the monastery of Helfta underwent a great trial, by being laid under an interdict. The cause of the trouble and its duration are difficult to ascertain. It appears, however, that certain canons usurped the functions of the Bishop of Haberstadt, in whose diocese the monastery of Helfta was situated. A question having arisen concerning the temporalities of the Benedictine nuns, an interdict was pronounced against them by the canons, who forbade them to chant the Divine Office or have Mass said in the convent choir until they yielded up their revenues.

This deprivation caused poignant grief to Gertrude and all her religious Sisters. During the last Mass celebrated before the interdict came into force the saint lovingly complained to our Lord, asking Him how He would console the religious in their great affliction. He replied that this suspension of the consolations of religion should only be an occasion for increasing their joy in His service. He promised to be with them during the interdict and to lavish on them more grace and love than they enjoyed while things went on as usual. He refused, however, to tell Gertrude how long the time of trial would last in order to preserve her in humility by hiding from her some of His secrets.

The next day there was no Mass in the convent choir ; but, while it was being celebrated for the people in the parish church, Gertrude, at the Communion, again complained to her Divine Spouse, "Dost Thou not compassionate us, most loving Father, that, for the sake of temporal goods which nourish the body, so that it may labour in Thy service, we are to-day deprived of that most precious banquet of Thy Body and Blood?" Our Lord gave her to understand that He had great compassion for the nuns, but that, nevertheless, the privation would increase rather than diminish their merit.

Gertrude told our Lord that she did not see how His grace could be with those who made her and her sisters

suffer so much. But He replied, "Do not trouble about that; I will settle the matter with them."

On the same day the saint again assisted in spirit at a later Mass. During the Elevation she offered the Sacred Host to the eternal praise of God, and for the benefit of the community. Our Lord received her oblation and promised to refresh the nuns with a Divine food. When Gertrude asked if each individual Sister would receive this spiritual communion He made known to her that He would give Himself to those only who were actually desiring Him, or who were habitually desirous of being nourished sacramentally with His Body and Blood.

As to the others, because they were members of the same community, they should not be wholly deprived of so great a favour; for they would receive an increase of actual grace, exciting them to desire their Lord in Holy Communion.

Time went on, and the severity of the interdict was somewhat mitigated. Mass was once more allowed in the convent though Holy Communion was still forbidden. On the feast of St Lawrence, which coincided with the commemoration of the dedication of the monastic church, Gertrude was favoured with a marvellous vision.

At the first Mass, she was praying for those who had recommended themselves to her, when she saw a mystic

vine come out from the throne of God, and form with its branches a ladder between heaven and earth. It symbolised the faith by which the just of all ages lift themselves up to heavenly things. At the top of the ladder, on the left of the throne, she saw several members of her own Order, and, at the moment when the sisters would have communicated had they not been prevented by the interdict, Jesus Christ rose and assumed an attitude of respect before His Heavenly Father. This caused Gertrude to desire greatly that she and her sisters might receive spiritually the Sacrament of life.

Then she saw our Lord holding in His Hand the Host which He plunged into the bosom of the Eternal Father, and drew out again, all tinged with a ruddy hue, as of blood. The saint was given to understand that our Lord had found a sweet dwelling of repose in the hearts of those sisters whom she had seen around God's throne.

Recollecting at that moment the needs of a person who had asked her prayers, Gertrude begged for her the same favour. But our Lord replied that no one can mount the ladder of faith without the support of confidence in God, a virtue in which the person for whom she prayed was somewhat deficient. The saint, with her usual holy temerity, lovingly expostulated with her Divine Spouse and said, " My Lord, it seems to me that

this person's want of trust is the result of her humility ; and it is upon the humble that Thou are wont to pour out Thy more abundant graces." This time she had her own way, for our Lord answered, "I will come down and will communicate My gifts to this person, and to all who abide in the valley of self-abasement."

At the same moment our Lord appeared to come down from heaven and seat Himself on the altar of the church, facing the priest. He was clothed in beautiful vestments, and held in His hand a vessel like a ciborium. At His right, in attendance upon Him, was a great multitude of angels, and these blessed spirits manifested special joy at being present.

On our Lord's left were Angels, Apostles, Martyrs, Confessors and Virgins, one choir of each, and Gertrude marvelled that the Virgins should be nearest to the throne. Then she remembered the words of Christ, "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God," and she understood that between the Virgins and our Blessed Lord there was a particular communication of spiritual delights which enveloped them in a bright light whiter than snow.

When the priest intoned the "Gloria in excelsis," Gertrude saw rising to heaven from the Heart of Jesus Christ a burning flame, which at the words, "et in terra pax hominibus bonæ voluntatis" spread itself over those assisting at the Mass. At the "sursum corda"

our Lord no longer remained seated, but, drawing to Himself the secret desires of all present, stood up with His hands raised and offered all their intentions, through the words of the Preface, to His Eternal Father.

Once again, during this time of trial, on the feast of the Assumption, Gertrude heard our Lord saying at the Elevation of the Host, "I come to offer Myself to My Eternal Father for My members." The saint exclaimed, "And wilt Thou, my Lord, permit Thy members to be cut off from Thee by anathemas launched against us by those who would deprive us of our goods?" Our Lord reassured her as before, saying that such anathemas would cause no more hurt than a cut made with a wooden knife. Immediately the love and gratitude of the saint found vent in a wondering regret that some among the community should find their love growing cold when their Divine Spouse would not suffer the injustice of their oppressors to do them any harm. "I have in Myself all good," our Lord told her, "and I distribute to each one according to his need."

CHAPTER IV

THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

ST GERTRUDE'S whole life was a striving to attain an ever closer union with her Divine Master. In this she was not in any way singular, for an intimate union with our Lord is the very aim and object of the religious life. Men and women do not enter religion to keep the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, nor even to practise high and heroic virtue as an end in itself; but they bind themselves by vows and strive after perfection as a means for attaining that union with God in this world which is the beginning of eternal union with Him in the next.

Now the foretaste and pledge of this divine union, "*pignus futuræ gloriæ*," as the Church sings in the office for Corpus Christi, is the reception of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. St Gertrude, like other saints, hungered and thirsted for

this heavenly food : her soul panted for the strong, living God.

In the Middle Ages it was no longer the custom for all Christians to communicate each time they assisted at Mass, and the days of renewed permission and exhortation to receive Communion daily, had not yet come. The practice of the Church in the thirteenth century allowed even religious to receive the Blessed Sacrament only once or twice a week. There are passages in St Gertrude's life which read as if Sunday were the appointed Communion day for the Benedictines of Helfta, but it is certain that they approached the altar on all great festivals, and they must have received the Blessed Eucharist more than once a week.

One day Gertrude, filled with holy envy, was thinking of the privilege of daily Communion enjoyed by priests. Lovingly she complained of this to our Lord, who had on one occasion told her that the glory of a soul would be increased by frequent reception of the Blessed Eucharist.

"How much, then, will priests surpass us in glory, dear Lord," she said, "since on account of their sacred ministry, they receive Holy Communion every day." Our Lord explained how greater fervour might compensate for less frequent reception ; because, though no one can approach Holy Communion in proper dispositions without obtaining an increase of the special

grace of the Sacrament, yet the fruit varies according to the earnestness of the preparation.

“There is one reward,” He said, “for those who approach this Mystery with desire and love; another for those who receive Me in fear and trembling; and yet another for those who prepare themselves by divers exercises. But none of these will be bestowed on him who approaches the Blessed Sacrament or celebrates merely out of custom or routine.”

Gertrude's feeble health often prevented her from receiving Holy Communion. At such times she would unite herself to our Lord spiritually, thereby obtaining from Him unusual supernatural favours; as if He were making up to her, as it were, for her disappointment. If too ill to communicate she would, nevertheless, assist, if possible, at Holy Mass. One day, while the priest was distributing the sacred particles to the other religious, our Lord showed Himself in such a way that He seemed to present the host to each with His own “sacred and venerable Hands.” At the same time Gertrude received a special blessing of such efficacy that she cried out in wonder, “O Lord, do those who receive Thee sacramentally obtain more grace than I do, whom Thou dost vouchsafe to bless unsolicited?”

Jesus deigned to reply, “Is a person decked in jewels and precious stones considered richer than one who possesses, hidden among his treasures, a great quantity

of gold?" He gave her to understand thereby that those who are obliged to abstain from the Holy Table and who, nevertheless, are inflamed with a longing desire to receive their Lord, merit graces similar to those given in sacramental Communion, but in a mysterious manner incomprehensible to human understanding.

According to a primitive custom, in use in certain localities as late as the thirteenth century, a particle of a consecrated host was given to a newly baptized infant. Gertrude, renewing in spirit, in one of her exercises, the different ceremonies of Baptism, says, "Recalling to mind the Communion thou didst receive of the life-giving Body and Blood of the Lamb without spot, say, 'O Jesus Christ, my Lord, may Thine adorable Body and Thy precious Blood preserve my body and my soul unto everlasting life.'" If this custom was observed in the case of Gertrude, her ardent devotion to the Blessed Sacrament is sufficiently explained; for her pure young soul thereby lived its full Catholic life from the very first, and contact with Jesus kept her heart unsullied, and untouched by any love but His.

Once, after Holy Communion, the saint had a vision of her own soul under the form of a clear crystal, glistening white. Within it was miraculously enclosed the Divinity of Jesus Christ, Whom she had just received, like a point of gold sending out glittering rays in all directions, while it produced operations of grace so

admirable, so inconceivable, and of such ineffable sweetness within her that the Blessed Trinity and all the saints looked upon her with profound delight.

Yet Gertrude did not always experience joy and sweetness in approaching this heavenly Banquet. Sometimes the devil disquieted her on account of her faults, or because of some seeming negligence in her preparation. But, well aware that in such matters God looks to the will and not the feelings, she was proof against the deceptions of the evil one.

In order to overcome her doubts and encourage herself in what she knew to be God's will, she used to hold dialogues with herself, of which the following is an example :—One Communion day she found herself but badly prepared; and, as the time was short, she addressed her soul in these words, "See, here is your Spouse already calling you. How will you go to meet Him without being clothed in the merits necessary to receive Him worthily?" Then, dwelling upon her utter unworthiness, and abandoning all trust in herself, she cast all her hopes on the goodness of God, saying "What good shall I gain by delay? Were I to spend a hundred years in preparation I should never be ready, seeing that I have absolutely nothing of my own which could serve, however inadequately, as a fitting preparation for so great a Sacrament. Therefore I will approach the altar with humility and confidence; and when my Lord sees

me from afar, moved by His own love for me, He will send to meet me all that is needed to make me fit to appear before Him."

And, adds the writer of the *Revelations*, "while she was advancing to receive Our Lord, He clothed her with His innocence as with a garment of spotless white, with His humility symbolised by a violet-coloured tunic, and so on, with the other virtues."

Another day, after a sermon in which God's justice had been dwelt upon at great length and with much emphasis, Gertrude was so terrified that she dared not receive Holy Communion until encouraged by our Lord Himself Who deigned to reproach her with her want of confidence, saying, "If you will not look with the eyes of your soul upon all I have done for you in so many ways, at least make use of your bodily eyes, and see how I am shut up in a narrow vessel in order to be brought before you. In just the same way is My justice encompassed by the sweetness of My mercy, of which in this Sacrament I give to the faithful so striking a proof."

One feast of St Matthew, Gertrude had, for several reasons, made up her mind not to go to Holy Communion. During the first Mass, as she was thinking about her relations towards God, our Lord presented Himself before her and lavished upon her all the marks of the tenderest friendship. Still she was not satisfied; for, accustomed as she was to the sublimest supernatural

favours, she desired, before approaching the Sacrament of love, to be wholly taken out of herself and united in the closest manner with her Beloved.

But as this grace was not that morning vouchsafed to her, she resumed her ordinary practice of thanking the Blessed Trinity for the abundant blessings poured out upon the saints, the Blessed Virgin and the Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ. She begged each in turn to offer in thanksgiving to the Three Divine Persons and in reparation for her negligences, the love and adoration with which they had presented themselves before God on entering heaven; while she herself repeated three times for the same intention the psalm "Laudate Dominum."

After this our Lord said to her, "How are you going to thank My saints for these offerings, since you are purposing to omit the oblation you are accustomed to make them?" To this the saint could make no reply; but at the Elevation of the Mass she desired ardently to make some worthy return to God. Then Jesus spoke to her again saying, "If you prepare yourself to-day to receive My Body and Blood, you shall most certainly obtain the threefold benefit you desire so eagerly. The sweetness of My love shall assuredly be given to you, so that, melted by the consuming fire of My Divinity, you shall be united with Me as silver and gold are made one in the fiery crucible. Thus shall you possess a

precious alloy which you can offer to God the Father in worthy homage, while all the saints receive therefrom full satisfaction."

Inflamed by these words, Gertrude no longer hesitated, but rose from her place and advanced to receive the Lord Who favoured her with such great graces. During her thanksgiving she distinctly heard these words, "Today you purposed to serve Me only as others do by carrying, as it were, straw, bricks and mortar, but I made choice of you to sit among those who were refreshed with the delights of My royal Table."

It happened on the same day that another religious abstained from Holy Communion without sufficient reason. The saint, ever mindful of others, asked our Lord why He had permitted her to be thus tempted, to which He replied, "Why do you blame Me? She so wrapped herself round with her own unworthiness that she could not see My fatherly love for her."

On one occasion the appointed confessor for the nuns was away, and on this account some doubted whether they ought to approach Holy Communion the next morning, which was the Sunday within the octave of the Epiphany, the day on which is venerated at Rome the image of the Holy Face. Some among the Sisters consulted Gertrude, and she advised them to make a spiritual confession in a manner taught her by our Lord, and then to receive Holy Communion without fear.

Others, trusting to our Lord's goodness, felt no hesitation, while others again abstained from communicating.

The saint saw in a vision these different souls. The first were clothed in robes of dazzling white, ornamented with precious stones, having the form and scent of violets, to signify the humility with which they sought and followed Gertrude's advice. They wore also rose-coloured garments, which symbolised the Passion of Christ, whereby all men are provided with a worthy preparation for Holy Communion. Seats were given to them next our Lord, that all might know that they had received special and precious gifts that day through their humility and her instrumentality.

Those who went to Holy Communion of their own accord were clothed with the rose-coloured garments only, but were also seated at table with our Lord; while those who, with sad hearts, had abstained from partaking of the heavenly Bread, were left standing; though they, too, received a share in the delights of the celestial Banquet.

Gertrude afterwards saw our Lord raise His Hand to bless the religious, while He promised that all who should keep devoutly the festival of His Holy Face should be interiorly enlightened in this life, and should bear for all eternity a special likeness to His own Divine Countenance.

A still greater favour was bestowed upon her when

one day our Lord Himself prepared Gertrude for Holy Communion. As she knelt quietly in her stall, heaven opened before her and Jesus stood beside her, inviting her to sit down with God the Father to a celestial banquet. Feeling her unworthiness, Gertrude shrank back and tried to withdraw ; but the Son of God came to her and took her apart to get her ready for the privilege to which He had invited her. First, He washed her hands in token of the forgiveness of her sins in virtue of the merits of His Sacred Passion. Then, taking off the ornaments He was wearing, He placed them upon her, warning her at the same time to comport herself in a manner befitting one to whom so much honour was shown. This the saint understood as an admonition against being troubled in conscience about her fitness to receive Holy Communion after she had earnestly besought our Lord to supply her defects by His merits.

One day when she was questioning her Divine Master about His visits to her in this Sacrament, He told her that a king in his palace is not accessible to everybody ; but, when he goes through the town to visit his queen, all the inhabitants enjoy his magnificence, and, thanks to her, rejoice in his benefits. In like manner, when Christ deigns to abase Himself in this life-giving Sacrament by entering a soul free from mortal sin, all who are in heaven, on earth, or in purgatory receive thereby consolation and grace.

Once again, when Gertrude was praying for a person who abstained from Communion through human respect, fearing to scandalise those who knew her faults, our Lord showed the saint the weakness of this excuse by the following comparison. "A man who sees a stain upon his hands washes them, and not only removes the stain but cleanses both his hands perfectly. In the same manner it sometimes happens that I allow My elect to fall into certain slight faults of which they at once repent, and so become more pleasing to Me by their humility.

"But there are some who, in return for My favours, do not correspond with My designs, neglecting after their act of contrition to adorn their souls in which I take so much pleasure; and thinking only of their exterior reputation. This happens whenever, without scruple, they deprive themselves of the graces they would receive in Holy Communion lest others might say they were not sufficiently prepared."

Our Lord went so far as to tell His servant on another occasion that the more unworthy the soul to which He stoops to communicate His favours, the more His mercy is exalted before all His creatures. These words almost frightened her, and she urged that those who abstain from Holy Communion because their conscience reproaches them with being wholly unworthy, do so out of reverence. Our Lord replied, "He who receives Me

with the disposition of which I have told you, namely the desire of My glory, will never receive Me with irreverence."

And so it came to pass that Gertrude's confidence grew to be so great that whenever she had heard others speaking of the danger of receiving the Holy Eucharist unworthily, or knew of anyone abstaining from it through mistaken fear and reverence, she always made her Communion with special joy and trust in the goodness of God.

Nor did the omission of her accustomed prayers and devotions ever keep her from receiving her Lord. When others consulted her, she would listen patiently to their doubts; and, speedily dissolving them, she would recommend utter trust in the goodness and mercy of God, and fearless reception of the adorable Sacrament.

The absolute sincerity of her soul made her one day doubt whether in all this there was not some presumption on her part. In her trouble she turned as usual to our Lord. He reassured her, saying that He had of His own free will chosen her as His dwelling; and that He would Himself be her guarantee that she should give a just and fitting answer to those who came in all sincerity and humility to consult her. "I promise you for certain," He added, "that I will not allow anyone who is unworthy to receive My Body and Blood to come and consult you on this subject. Therefore, whosoever comes

to you, overwhelmed and weary, to be delivered of his burden, shall receive from your lips the assurance that he may approach without fear."

One more instance, but that a striking one, shall be given of how the teachings of the Church about the Blessed Eucharist in the thirteenth and in the twentieth century are in accord. A certain person, acting under the influence of an indiscreet zeal, was moved with indignation against several others who approached Holy Communion frequently and yet appeared to him careless and indifferent. Matters went so far that he addressed public reproaches to those he considered in fault. Some timid souls were greatly distressed, and not a few absented themselves altogether from the Holy Table.

Gertrude characteristically set to work not only to pray for the rigorist, but also to enquire of our Lord what He thought of this manner of acting. Our Lord's reply was given in the following words, dictated afterwards by the saint herself, "My delight is to be with the children of men; and, moved by love alone, I have left a memorial of Myself in this Sacrament, so that men may think of Me and remember Me with fidelity. Besides, I have promised to remain with men in the Blessed Sacrament till the end of time. Hence, anyone who by his words or remarks keeps another, who is not in mortal sin, away from Communion, prevents or

impedes the delight I find in coming into the heart of that person.

“Such a one is like an over severe tutor who, because he thinks it more fitting that his royal pupil should enjoy the honour due to his rank than that he should play with boys of his own age, prevents them from having access to him, or scolds them for coming near the king’s son, though the prince himself takes great pleasure in their company.”

Gertrude then asked whether God would pardon this person if he resolved in future to let the matter alone. Our Lord replied, “Not only will I forgive him, but I shall be just as pleased with this resolution as would have been that young prince, had his tutor led his young companions to him and bid them play together, to make up for having previously sent them away through over-severity.”

Towards the end of her life Gertrude often had to make heroic efforts to overcome the physical weakness which finally prevented her from walking, or so much as raising herself without help. One feast of All Saints she felt better than usual, and had walked unaided to the choir for Mass. When the moment of Communion drew nigh a great weakness came over her, and, as she had not arranged with anyone to take her up to the altar rails, she cried out in distress to our Lord, “How can I rise and approach to receive Thee, my dearly

Beloved, my God and my Saviour, when Thou comest to me in Thy Sacrament, for my strength has all left me and I have asked no one to help me?"

At once the answer came, "What need have you of the help of men, My beloved, when, leaning on Me, you are borne up by My all-powerful arm? I Myself will give you sufficient strength to rise and walk." And so it came to pass. With supernatural strength the saint rose from her stall and went to receive her Lord, bearing Him back within her heart to hold sweet converse with her until her spirit became one with His.

Her loving Saviour would not tolerate in His chosen spouse anything that savoured, in the least degree, of sentiment or exaggerated piety. She was one day praying that her last food on earth might be the Holy Viaticum, when our Lord showed her that this request was not at all according to His wish. His own food was to do His heavenly Father's will, and the effect of His Eucharistic presence in the soul cannot be diminished by any corporal necessity whatever.

In the thirteenth century the cultus of the Blessed Sacrament was not what it is to-day, though there had already been a great outburst of devotion throughout Catholic Christendom in answer to the heresy of Berengarius in the eleventh century. This movement, which culminated in the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1264, was characterised by an intense

desire on the part of the faithful to look upon the Sacred Host. There are several traces of this spirit in the writings of St Gertrude.

At that time the Blessed Sacrament was not reserved in a tabernacle on the altar but in a vessel called variously "turrus," "pyxis," "columba," or "ciborium." In the south of France, Italy, and Germany, it was generally placed in a small cupboard constructed in a pillar, or in a wall of the sanctuary near the high altar. Not until the fifteenth century did it become a common usage to have a tabernacle built into the altar.

Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament for a considerable space of time was also unknown; and though, after the institution of the Feast of Corpus Christi, the practice of carrying the Sacred Host in procession became common, there is no evidence to show that the vessel containing it was open to view like the modern monstrance.

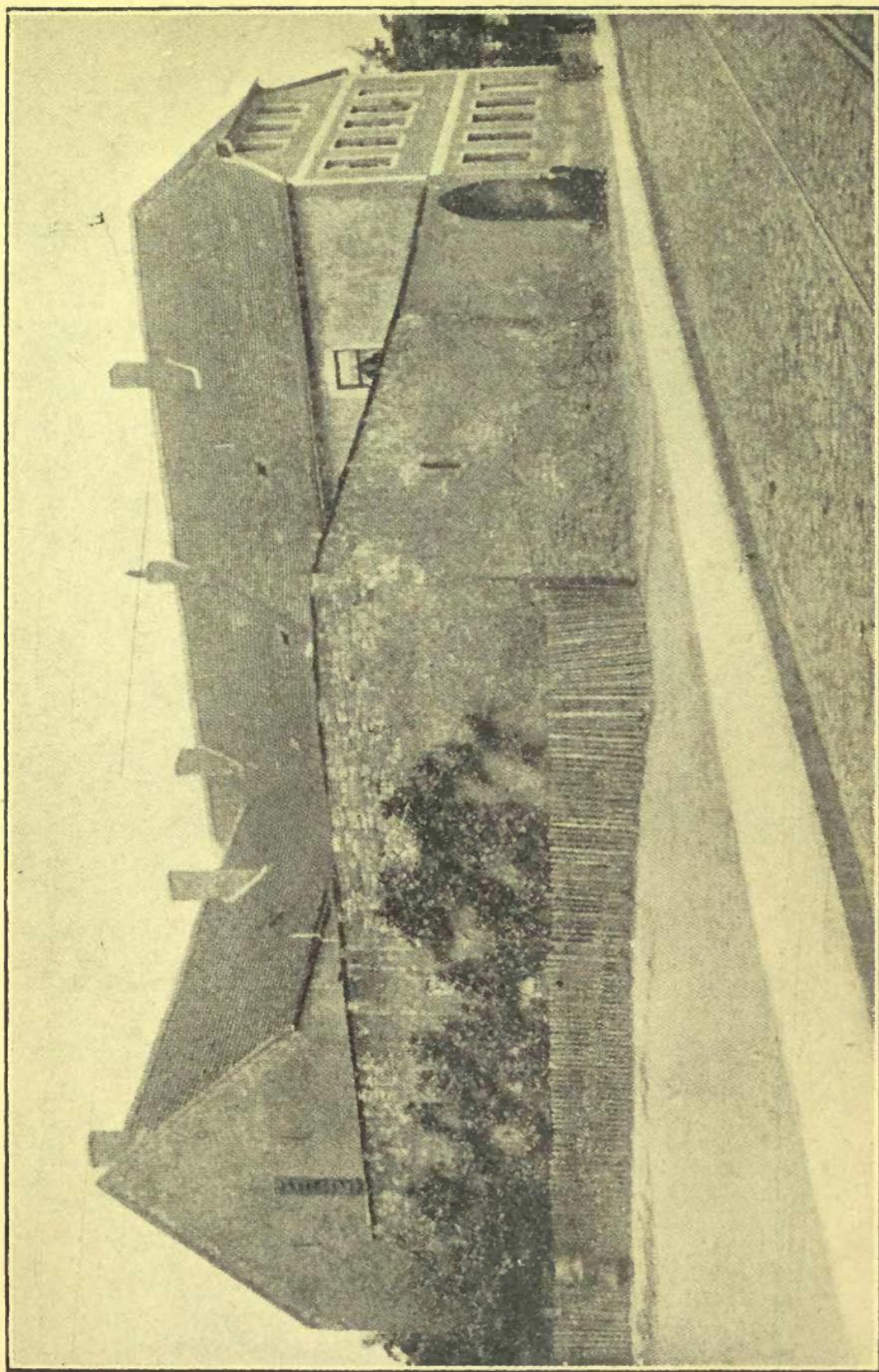
Yet, even without these external helps to devotion, the saints of old were fascinated by their Lord, present for them, as He is to-day for us, in the Sacrament of His love; but their longing to gaze upon His sacramental veils had to be satisfied with the few brief moments of the Elevation, or those in which the priest was distributing to the faithful the Bread of Life.

And so we find Gertrude ardently desiring to look upon the Sacred Host while Holy Communion was

being given. Once, when she was prevented from thus satisfying her devotion by the great concourse of people coming to and from the altar, she heard our Lord inviting her to approach with the rest. Would she know the secret of His attraction for her, He said, she must partake of this Divine Food ; for it is by tasting, not by seeing, that one learns the sweetness contained in this heavenly manna.

Surely St Gertrude must have specially exulted when the great Pope of the Eucharist, Pius X, urged Daily Communion on the whole of the flock. And surely she rejoices in heaven as those aspirations to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, which he so plentifully indulgenced, rise from the hearts and lips of the faithful ; and, above all, perchance, when looking upon the uplifted Host they exclaim with Thomas : “ My Lord and my God ! ”

In the fourth book of the *Herald of Divine Love* this passage occurs : “ She understood that each time anyone looks with longing and devotion upon the Host which sacramentally contains the Body of Jesus Christ, he augments his merit for heaven ; because, in the future vision of God throughout eternity, the Blessed will experience special delights for each look of love and devotion they cast during life upon the Body of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament ; or that they have wished to cast upon Him, provided that some reason-



MONASTERY OF NEW-HELFTA, OR TRUDKLOSTER

able cause prevented them from actually satisfying their desire."

In obedience to her Divine Teacher, Gertrude wrote down what He revealed to her and waited for God, in His own good time, to kindle anew in men's hearts that hunger and thirst for the Eucharistic Bread which had marked the early ages of the Church.

CHAPTER V

GOLD IN THE FURNACE

“IT is no small matter,” says à Kempis, “to live in a monastery, or in a congregation, to converse therein without reproach and to persevere faithfully till death. . . Here men are tried as gold in the furnace.” Under this test Gertrude’s virtue proved to be pure gold. She lived for others, and was so unconscious of her own merits as to be convinced that the Divine favours were bestowed upon her solely for the advantage of her neighbour.

From her writings we gather that the nuns at Helfta were not only allowed but encouraged to go to her for spiritual advice. When sought for on this account, the saint gladly left even the sweetness of contemplation and of familiar intercourse with our Lord to attend to the call of a Sister in distress and to minister to her needs.

She was accustomed to say that whatever good others

saw in her was a pure gift of God, which, so long as she kept it to herself was like a treasure hidden beneath a heap of rubbish; but which, as soon as she communicated it to others, became like a precious jewel mounted in gold. "By her actions as well as by her words," writes her biographer, "she clearly proved that she sought not her own glory but the glory of God."

With this end in view she procured and distributed, as far as possible, any books or writings which she thought might be of use to others, especially the Holy Scriptures. This is worthy of note, because one of the complaints of Martin Luther against the Church was that Catholics were not allowed to make use of the Bible. Yet here, in the very birthplace of the heresiarch is a striking proof of the contrary.

Many an hour did the saint pass in translating from Latin into German spiritual writings which she thought might be of service to the illiterate. Nor were her labours unnoticed by her Lord. One day He appeared to her bearing on His shoulders a vast building which was leaning to one side as if about to fall.

"See," He said, "with what zeal I support My well-beloved dwelling, the edifice, that is, of holy religion, threatened throughout the entire world, because none sincerely care to labour for its preservation and extension, nor to bear for its sake any privation. Look well, My beloved, and compassionate Me in My

fatigue. All those who, by word or act, further the cause of religion, support Me, as buttresses do a building, and help to sustain this weight which is crushing Me."

Touched to the depths of her soul by these words, Gertrude devoted herself more than ever to the good of her Sisters and the progress of religion, seeking to observe perfectly every point of her rule in its greatest strictness, that she might help others by her good example and kindle in their hearts a great zeal for the salvation of souls. As far as ordinary duties went, the saint kept up this fervour all her life; but from extraordinary labours our Lord often called her away, that she might enjoy the sweet repose of contemplation.

Yet she never wholly abandoned the service of her neighbour; but, as long as she remained on earth, gave edification by her blameless life, her exhortations and her prayers. Her tender heart made her compassionate towards everyone in distress, and if she could not otherwise succour them she sought to comfort and encourage them by her letters. Even the dumb creatures had claims upon her; and, when she saw birds or other animals suffering, she would offer their pains in homage to God, begging Him not to forget them in their necessities.

So ardently did the love of God urge her to seek what was most perfect, not only in herself but in others,

that her quick and fiery temperament sometimes caused her to rebuke her Sisters with burning words and some severity. Once, after an outburst of this kind, the Sister reproved, complained to our Lord, begging Him to moderate the zeal of His handmaid. "When I was on earth," He replied, "I also was aflame with zeal; and nothing displeased Me so much as a want of strict justice. Therefore, in this point, My servant does but resemble Me."

"But, Lord," rejoined the religious, "You were only stern towards the wicked; while her words, on the contrary, often wound those who seem to be living virtuous lives." To this our Lord answered sweetly, "The Jews, when I was among them, passed for the holiest nation among men; and, nevertheless, they were the first to be scandalised in My regard."

Gertrude was quite aware of what people thought of her, and of their inability to appreciate her true motives; but in this knowledge she found food for humility. Indeed, she had our Lord's own testimony that He allowed it for her greater good. "As often as, for love of Me," He said, "you suffer reproach, so often will I strengthen you and bear you up, so that nothing may be an obstacle between your soul and Me. And I will add to your merit what the person admonished would have gained by submitting humbly to your advice."

Again, when St Mechtilde was consulting our Lord

about what she considered Gertrude's impetuosity in promptly executing any plan that came into her head, and passing rapidly from one duty to another, she was given to understand that what seemed like impulsiveness was, in reality, the effect of the conscious presence of God in which Gertrude always lived. St Mechtilde then saw her in a vision passing to and fro before the throne of God, eagerly breathing in all the aspirations of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

And our Lord explained to her what she saw, saying, "The life and conversation of My chosen spouse is such that, walking always in My presence as you see her now, she seeks only to know what is pleasing to My Divine Heart. As soon as she recognises My wishes on any point, she exerts herself to the utmost to realise them; and then returns to learn what I desire next, that she may satisfy Me without delay. Thus her whole life is consecrated to My honour and glory."

But St Mechtilde, who was also rather troubled about Gertrude's want of patience with the faults of others, ventured to reply, "O, my Lord, if this is the case, whence comes it that she so often judges her neighbour with so much severity?" Jesus replied, "As she never willingly allows the smallest stain to defile her own heart, so she cannot look with indifference upon the faults of another."

St Gregory tells us that the sanctity of the just does

not consist in working miracles, but rather in perfect charity. Our Lord, however, not content with defending His lowly handmaid, vouchsafed to bless and confirm her devotedness to the interests of her neighbour by answering her prayers in a manner that was often evidently miraculous.

One winter the frost lasted far into the month of March, and the intense cold threatened both men and beasts with destruction. It was feared that so late a spring would leave no time for the ripening of the crops. Gertrude was quite as anxious as the farmers were, and spoke to our Lord about it during Mass. He promised that He would grant her petition for better weather. "If I am really heard, dear Lord," she said, "and if indeed I should now thank Thee for this favour, I beseech Thee to give me a proof of Thy goodness by moderating this intense cold."

She thought no more of the matter until, coming out from church after Mass, she found the roads transformed into rivers of mud by reason of the rapid melting of the snow and ice. Old men shook their heads and everybody prophesied that the sudden and unexpected thaw would not last. From that day, however, mild spring weather set in and continued without interruption.

Another year, at harvest time, the grain and fruit were in danger on account of a continued fall of rain. The community prayed publicly for fine weather and

Gertrude, in particular, was so earnest in her request that at last she obtained the favour. The sun shone out, bright and warm, though heavy clouds still hung round the horizon. In the evening the Sisters were gathered in the courtyard of the monastery, busy at some manual labour, when one of them overheard Gertrude saying, with a sigh, "O Lord God of the universe, I do not wish to constrain Thee to submit to my unworthy will ; but if Thine infinite goodness deigns solely for my sake, against the decrees of Thy justice, to prevent the rain from falling, I beseech Thee, let Thy justice have its way and Thy will be accomplished without hindrance."

Almost before the words had passed her lips, there was a vivid flash of lightning, accompanied by a terrific clap of thunder, while heavy drops of rain began to fall. Stupefied by this answer to her prayer, the saint cried out, "Let Thy goodness restrain itself, O merciful God, until we have finished the task imposed upon us by obedience." Forthwith the storm ceased ; and not a drop fell until the Sisters, their work finished, crossed once more the threshold of the convent. Then came a deluge of rain with incessant lightning and deafening peals of thunder.

Yet Gertrude's petitions were not invariably granted. Once, for instance, it happened that by reason of continued east winds the country was suffering from

great drought. As she was praying for a change of weather she received the reply, "By My grace, your will is so united with Mine that you cannot desire anything otherwise than as I will it. Know then, that in order to compel certain rebellious souls to have recourse to Me in prayer, I will not grant your petition, but, instead, will bestow on you some spiritual favour."

From that time Gertrude never troubled herself when the exact matter of her requests to God was not granted. She realised fully that He Who knows what is best for His children will not let any prayer pass unheeded but will give "better gifts" than those for which, in blind ignorance, they sometimes ask.

As in important affairs, so in matters of small moment, she put no trust in herself but in God alone. Thus, one day as she was seated at work, having dropped some little object such as a bodkin or a needle into the straw at her feet, she exclaimed, "Dear Lord, Thou knowest that all my efforts could not find so tiny an instrument in the straw. Do Thou, therefore, find it for me." Her companions heard her, and were astonished when, plunging her hand without looking into the layers of straw, she at once found what she had lost.

Living thus her hidden life, she practised a perfection of virtue rare even in religion. With absolute self-effacement she gave the first place to her community and to others, seeing in all the Person of our Lord.

Even with regard to food, clothing, books and other necessaries she would shut her eyes and take the object she touched first that so she might receive exactly what God had destined for her use, whether it was to her natural liking or not.

Everything belonging to the monastery she looked upon as God's property and she was wont to pity heathens because they could not share anything in common with our Lord. Allowing herself only what was strictly necessary, she kept her heart detached even from such things, and all with great joyousness of spirit, though God allowed her at times to feel her own imperfection and weakness, thereby to lead her to greater heights of sanctity.

One August, for instance, near the feast of St Bartholomew, Gertrude had been suffering for some days from great sadness and a feeling of impatience with all around her, so that she seemed to herself to have lost altogether the joy of God's presence within her. Some amelioration of the trouble came to her through the intercession of our Lady on the Saturday following the feast, during the singing in choir of "Stella Maris."

But later on she was disturbed again, and reproached herself bitterly with her faults, begging our Lord to come to her aid. In reply, her Divine Spouse showed her a tiny garden filled with different sorts of flowers,

and asked her if she would like to offer it to him. Thinking it quite unworthy of His Majesty, she refused. Then He showed her another garden all covered with mire, in which a few unhealthy plants were struggling for life; but Gertrude was indignant at the thought of such an offering.

Our Lord next explained to her why her soul was unlike both these gardens. "Why do you trouble yourself," He said, "since your soul is steeped in charity, and charity covereth a multitude of sins? And why talk in a despairing way about your sins when your will is so one with Mine that you never act according to your own inclination, though thereby you could live at ease, sheltered from adversity, possessing the favour of the world and a reputation for sanctity? Know that, under the figure of a garden of flowers, I showed you the pleasures of such a life, and under that of a muddy garden the satisfactions of a life of self-indulgence, and you would have nothing to do with either."

"Would to God," sighed the saint, "that in renouncing them I had also renounced my self-will! for I fear I despised the flower-garden only because it was so small." Our Lord reassured her, "It is thus," He said, "that in my loving tenderness I restrain the desire of My servants for the conveniences of life, by sending them remorse of conscience when they are tempted to

seek them, so that they may by this the more easily come to despise them."

It would seem from several passages in Gertrude's writings that her sisters did not always appreciate the privilege of having a saint living among them. Not that she complains in set terms of any unkindness, but she sometimes turns for consolation to her Divine Saviour. She well knew that He permitted these trials for her greater good, and in order that she might more closely resemble Him Who was despised and rejected of men.

This truth was brought home to Gertrude one day when she was praying that some fault in one of her superiors might be corrected. "Do you not know," asked our Lord, "that not only this person but all who are in charge of this beloved congregation have some defects? No one in this life is altogether free from imperfection. This is an effect of My goodness, and I allow it in order that the merit of all may be increased. There is far more virtue in submitting to a person whose faults are evident than to one who appears perfect."

Sometimes God allowed Satan to come and molest His servant. One day as she was spinning she let some flocks of wool fall to the ground. All at once the devil appeared to her, picking up these bits and holding them out to her as a proof of her carelessness

in work which she had offered to God. Gertrude turned with childlike confidence to our Lord, imploring His help; and He came at her call and drove Satan away, reproaching him with daring to insinuate himself into a work which, from its very beginning, had been undertaken solely for God's honour and glory.

There is also a tradition, perpetuated in some pictures of St Gertrude, that the Evil One sought to disturb her while at prayer by appearing under the form of a large mouse or a rat. Another version of the same story is that she prayed so hard and prayed so long that a little mouse crept out of the woodwork and ran all over her, while she, quite dead to the things of this world, never turned her thoughts from what she was doing. It may be that in these legends there is some confusion between St Gertrude the Great and St Gertrude of Nivelles, who died A.D. 659, and is invoked against rats and mice.

As far as possible, in community life, Gertrude kept herself free from all singularity, taking care to hide the wonderful favours she received and following, whenever she could, the common way. She had once asked our Lord to teach her some practice in memory of His Passion, and He had told her to pray with her arms extended in the form of a cross. This would remind God the Father of the death of His Only Begotten Son, and would be a petition for the wants of the Church in

union with the love with which He Himself had stretched forth His Hands while He hung between heaven and earth for our Redemption.

But Gertrude said, "If I pray with my arms extended, I must hide myself in a corner to do it, for it is not according to our customs." Our Saviour answered, "Care to seek a secluded place in which to perform this devotion is quite pleasing to Me, and will render the action more meritorious in My sight, just as an embroidery of pearls enhances the value of a garment. Nevertheless, if anyone makes a practice of praying publicly with arms extended, not heeding the adverse criticisms of others, he will do Me as much honour as is done to a king when he is publicly enthroned."

Since St Gertrude's day the practice of praying with arms extended has become widely used. It is common among Catholics on the Continent, and especially at Lourdes.

It often happened that, when the saint was in choir with the other religious, she would become so rapt in God as not to stand or kneel at the accustomed times during the recitation of the Divine Office. A Sister one day admonished her of her strange behaviour. As soon as she was made aware of her singularity she begged her Divine Master so to regulate her external movements that, while her heart was wholly occupied with

Him, she might not give disedification; and the favour was granted.

Sometimes she was so lost in God that, though the Sisters touched her or spoke to her, she paid no attention until the Divine Presence was withdrawn. Then she would return to the ordinary exercises of religious life, content to be without consolation, and to serve God with the sole reward of knowing that she was doing His will.

One little peculiarity or mannerism of hers has come down to us. She had a habit, perhaps a result of her love of the exact truth, of saying in reply to a question, "God knows." Fearing lest this constant repetition of God's name might be an irreverence, she prayed that she might be cured of the habit and never pronounce the name of God in vain. Nothing could be more consoling than the answer she received: "Why would you deprive Me of this honour," said our Lord, "and lose the reward you gain each time that, recognising this fault, or some other, you make a resolution to avoid it in future? When, for love of Me, My servants strive to overcome their faults, they show Me as much loyalty and honour as a soldier gives to his commanding officer when he fights bravely in battle and conquers the enemy by his courage and the strength of his arm."

Gertrude used often to pray that God would make good all her defects in the fulfilment of her religious

obligations. Once, as she was offering the Sacred Host for this intention just before she received Holy Communion, she saw herself presented by Jesus Christ to God the Father, clothed in a tunic made up of as many pieces as she had spent years in religion. As she gazed, the tunic unfolded itself in such wise that there was not in it the shadow of a crease; but she could distinguish quite clearly the days and hours in each year and all the thoughts, words and deeds, good as well as faulty, in the smallest detail, moment by moment, as they had occurred.

She saw distinctly whether what she had undertaken had been for the glory of God, the good of her own soul and of others, or merely for the praise of men or to the detriment of her neighbour; also, all she had done to seek her ease, or by way of mortification, whether prompted by obedience or by her own free choice. Imperfect actions were represented by little stones set in clay very insecurely.

But when, at the saint's request, the Son of God interceded for her, offering to His Father His blameless and perfect Life, the tunic appeared to be covered with cloth of gold of fine texture and brilliant lustre, through which shone forth with perfect distinctness, the various degrees of merit due to all these thoughts, words, actions and intentions. The least grain of dust, that is each detail in her life, now appeared in the light

of infallible Truth, and could not escape the eye of God.

This vision urged Gertrude to pray still more fervently that she might become fruitful in good actions by virtue of the adorable Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. Our Divine Lord promised to hear her prayers and also told her that He would, through her, draw many others to Himself.

CHAPTER VI

THE HERALD OF DIVINE LOVE

CLOISTERED religious as she was, Gertrude devoted herself untiringly to works for the good of others, even outside the monastery. She spread the "good odour of Christ" far and wide; and, by her prayers, her writings and her conversation, she drew many to a more fervent service of her King.

As her reputation for sanctity increased, persons of all classes of society came to Helfta to see her, so that she was often fain to withdraw from the crowd of visitors. An excuse to do so was sometimes furnished by her ill-health, when she would go to rest and lie so still with her eyes closed, that those who came to tell her she was wanted went away without disturbing her, thinking she was asleep.

The limpid straightforwardness of Gertrude's character made her doubt whether this was pleasing to our Lord, and she one day asked Him whether she ought

to let the Sisters know that she was not really asleep. Perhaps even the saint with all her knowledge and love of Christ, was surprised at the tenderness of His answer: "No; let them find in this act of charity on your behalf the reward of charity, which I take so much pleasure in bestowing."

More often than not, however, Gertrude responded to the many calls made upon her time and patience, and willingly went to see those who frequently came long distances for help and consolation. But all the time she was longing for the moment when she could be once more with her beloved Lord. "Her intercourse with the world was a real cross to her," says her biographer. Indeed, it was only because speech with strangers gave her an opportunity of exercising her zeal for God's glory and the good of souls, that Gertrude ever brought herself to undertake it.

Even so, very often, in the fervour of her spirit, she would arise and hasten away from the parlour to her stall in the choir, saying, "See, now, dear Lord, how weary I am of all creatures. Were I free to choose, I would have no other companionship and no other conversation but Thine. I abandon them all and return to Thee, O my supreme Good and the only joy of my heart and soul." Then, taking her crucifix and kissing the five sacred wounds of Christ, she would say, "Hail Jesus, Spouse full of grace and refreshment! I em-

brace Thee in the joy of Thy Divinity, with the love of the entire world, and kiss devoutly these wounds of Thy love." As she did this, all her weariness left her.

Although this pious practice did not occupy many minutes, our Lord revealed to His loving spouse that it was very pleasing to Him, and told her that His Sacred Heart kept count of all these marks of her affection, that they might one day be rewarded a thousand-fold. Thus was she thrown back more strongly upon God by what to another might have proved a temptation to worldly pleasure. "I can find nothing on this earth, sweet Lord," she would say, "that can give me pleasure, save Thyself alone, O dearest Master!"

And, taking up her words, her loving Lord one day replied, "I, too, can find no delight in heaven or earth without you. For I have associated you by My love to all My joys, so that I take no pleasure in anything which I do not share with you. Moreover, the greater My joy is, the greater fruit there is for you."

Nor was it surprising that Gertrude spent her whole life in one longing desire, "to be dissolved and to be with Christ." An incident is related which probably occurred while she was yet young, and before she exchanged her child's habit for that of a Benedictine novice. She was one day out of doors with several companions when, missing her footing, she fell from a

considerable height. Her first impulse as she felt herself falling, was one of joy, which speedily changed to regret, when she found that a sudden death had not opened for her the gates of heaven. "How happy I should have been, dear Lord," she cried out, "if this accident had brought me at once into Thy presence!" Her companions, it appears, were somewhat scandalised at this exclamation, for they knew nothing of Gertrude's secret and intimate friendship with our Blessed Lord.

"Would you not be afraid to appear before God without having received the Last Sacraments?" they asked her. All Gertrude's loving trustfulness in God came out in her reply, "I desire with all my heart to receive the Sacraments of the Church; but, nevertheless, the Will and Providence of God seem to me better and more salutary as a preparation for death. Suddenly, or by a death long foreseen, in whatever manner God wills, I will go to Him willingly. In whatever way my death may come, my only hope is in God's mercy, by which alone I can be saved."

This perfect detachment from created things did not, however, lessen Gertrude's zeal for souls; and she received many special promises and revelations concerning her work for them. Once some one had asked her prayers, and, in her humility, she feared lest the petition was more than she could obtain. Our Lord

reassured her, "How much soever any one hopes to obtain through your prayers he shall receive. Whatever you promise in My name shall be given, even though the person, through human weakness, may not perceive what I have done."

Some days after this, Gertrude was recalling the promise made to her, and mindful of her own unworthiness, she asked our Lord how so great a privilege could be granted to one so vile as she. He reminded her of the power of binding and loosing which He left to the Apostles, and asked if she did not believe He was powerful enough to accomplish His promise to her. Then, touching her tongue He added, "Behold, I have given My words into your mouth, and I truly confirm whatever you may say to others by My inspiration and in My name. If you, upon earth, promise anything through My goodness, I will most certainly ratify your promise in heaven."

Yet, even then, Gertrude's diffidence was not wholly overcome, and she answered, "Lord, I would grieve were anyone to incur eternal loss through my fault. What if I were to say, on the impulse of the moment, that some fault could not remain unpunished, or something else of a like nature?" Our Lord reassured her, "When your love of justice or zeal for souls," He said, "prompts you to speak thus, I, on My side, will so act by My goodness upon the person you admonish, as to

move him to repentance so that he will no longer deserve to be punished."

Gertrude found yet another objection, "If Thou dost really speak through me, dear Lord," she said, "how is it that my words sometimes produce so little fruit?" Our Lord replied, "Marvel not that your words seem sometimes to produce no effect, since, when I dwelt among men and preached to them with Divine power and authority, My words did not bear fruit in the hearts of all." Thus was the saint encouraged in her task of helping and correcting others even against their will. Our Lord gave her a further assurance of His guidance, promising that her exhortations should always be suitable to the fault committed. Then, utterly overwhelmed by the dignity of her vocation, Gertrude exclaimed in an outburst of humble gratitude, "O, King of heaven and earth, withhold the torrent of Thy mercies; dust and ashes as I am, I am unworthy of such wondrous favours!"

"Is it such a wondrous thing," asked our Saviour, "that I should make you judge of the cause of My displeasure in others, when I have so often communicated to you the secrets of My friendship?" He promised further that none who sought help from Gertrude should go away disappointed, a promise which He confirmed in a vision granted to St Mechtilde. As the latter was one day praying for Gertrude, she saw

her heart under the form of a bridge, strengthened on one side by the Divinity of Jesus Christ, and on the other by His Sacred Humanity, as by two massive walls, while she heard distinctly these words, "Those who come to Me by this bridge cannot fall or mistake the way." St Mechtilde understood this to mean that anyone who received Gertrude's advice humbly, and put it in practice, would be preserved from committing grievous sins.

On another occasion, our Lord appearing to Gertrude said, "My beloved, give Me your heart." When the saint had joyfully presented it to Him, she saw Him place it against His own most Sacred Heart and then, drawing it out into a long tube reaching to the earth, He poured through it an abundant torrent of graces, saying as He did so, "Henceforth it will be My pleasure to use your heart as a channel through which I can pour out, from the inexhaustible well-spring of My Divine Heart, torrents of consolation on those who dispose themselves to receive them; that is, upon those who have recourse to you with confidence and humility." In her prayers for others, Gertrude used to remind her loving Saviour of this promise, and sometimes it was granted to her to see the vision renewed in favour of someone in whom she was specially interested.

When Gertrude had no direct lights upon the spiritual state of those who came to consult her, she would turn

to our Lord and say, "O, Lord, Thou knowest the hearts of all! Deign to reveal to me, all unworthy as I am, something which shall be both pleasing to Thee and profitable to those who ask my advice." Her Divine Master never failed to teach her what to say. He also gave her typical instructions, as it were, one for well educated persons, another for the ignorant, or for those engaged in manual labour; one for prelates and superiors, and yet another for persons in temptation, or weighed down by the burden of their sins.

A striking testimony to this privilege is furnished by Gertrude's friend and confidante, St Mechtilde. The sympathy and union existing between these chosen souls sprang from something far deeper than mere human friendship. Its root was the tender love each bore to Christ our Lord, a love that left no room in their hearts for any affection which was not in Him and for Him. Both saints received most wonderful favours from God, about which they spoke together, understanding each other as only saints can.

Mechtilde was the elder of the two, and sister, as has been said, of the Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn, a circumstance which gave her a certain dignity among her religious Sisters. This, together with her great virtue, made it natural for the younger saint to look up to her, and often to have recourse to her for advice, or for the solution of her difficulties regarding her revelations.

Weighed down, one day, by the sense of her own unworthiness of the great graces God was showering upon her, Gertrude sought out St Mechtilde and begged her to consult our Lord about the wonderful promises He had made to her. Mechtilde at once responded to the appeal, and our Lord showed her how near Gertrude's heart was to His own. "When you see the heart of My servant," He said, "close to the wound in My side, know that I have so disposed its movements in My regard that it is ready at all times to receive the influx of My Divinity."

Thereupon St Mechtilde questioned further, "Hast Thou, O Lord, granted Thy chosen spouse the grace of giving the right answer to those who consult her, so that they are thereby set on the road to heaven?" Our Lord replied, "I have certainly favoured her with this privilege; and there is nothing anyone can ask through her intercession which I will not faithfully grant. If she thinks a soul worthy to receive Me in Holy Communion, My mercy will not find it unworthy. Should she even have to urge men, with many entreaties, to communicate, I shall yet entertain for them a special affection. According as she judges the faults of those who consult her as more or less grievous, so shall I estimate them in My Divine judgment. But, as there are Three who give testimony in heaven—the Father,

the Son, and the Holy Spirit—so must she always rest her decisions on this triple observance:—

“First, she must never give spiritual advice to anyone unless she is interiorly moved to do so by the Holy Ghost. Secondly, she must only speak when she sees that the person concerned has true contrition, or at least a desire for true contrition. Thirdly, she may speak if she feels sure of the person’s good will. When these three signs occur together she may reply safely without hesitation whatever her mind prompts her to say, and I will always confirm the promises she makes in My name.

“Each time she would give advice let her draw to herself, with deep humility, the sentiments of My Divine Heart. Then, all that she says can be taken as true, neither she nor the person she advises running any risk of mistake. Nay, more, others shall learn through her words the secrets of My Heart.”

This testimony was to be carefully preserved. “If by lapse of time,” said our Lord, “it seems to her that My grace is diminished by reason of her divers occupations, as sometimes happens, let her not lose confidence because I will maintain this privilege intact for her until the end of her life.” So it came to pass that Gertrude helped others by her words, as she has helped many by her writings ever since.

The complete disclosure of her secrets on which our

Lord insisted was very painful to the saint, but she was enlightened as to the motive of His command. "In learning about the favours bestowed on you," He said, "many will desire like graces; and, urged on by this thought, they will endeavour, be it ever so little, to lead better lives."

Another reason which held her back was the thought that many weak and unspiritual persons, far from being edified by the recital of her graces, would only find therein a subject of raillery and contempt. Or perhaps they would calumniate her and dishonour our Lord by denying the truth of what she wrote. Again He answered her objection, saying, "I have so planted my grace in you that I expect it to bear Me immense fruit. It is My desire that those who, receiving similar favours and carelessly despising them, see this fruit in you, shall recognise the greatness of the gift and make a return of gratitude by striving to advance further in the paths of holiness. If any prefer to defame what you have written, the sin will fall on their own heads and you shall not be accountable for it."

Still Gertrude hesitated, though her conscience left her no peace. She writes thus, "I considered it scarcely fitting that my writings should be made public and I could by no means follow my conscience on this point." On the feast of the Annunciation 1289, however, under the inspiration of God she suddenly took the writing-

tablets which hung by her side, and began to record the history of her "conversion." She wrote but little and then abandoned all writing for several months. Hence she continues, "This state of hesitation lasted until the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. On that day I finally made up my mind to devote myself to good works instead of to recording my graces." Hardly had she made this resolution when Christ overcame all her resistance by the following words, "Know for certain that you will not be released from the prison of the body until you have completely paid down to the last farthing the debt you now withhold."

"At this," writes the saint, "I reflected secretly that I had already used God's gift to me for the good of my neighbour, if not by writing, at least by my words. Our Lord answered my thought, saying, 'Had the Son of God willed to teach His doctrine only to those who were present He would not have had it recorded in writing. But now His words are written down for the salvation of many. I desire to have in your writings an irrefragable proof of My Divine goodness in those latter times in which I purpose to do good to many!'"

Gertrude, with something of alarm, began to consider how difficult, not to say impossible, it would be for her to find words capable of expressing these things without danger of scandal or misunderstanding. But a sign was given to her. "Our Lord," she says, "wishing effectively

to overcome my weakness, seemed to send down upon me an abundant shower of rain, the violence of which beat me flat to the ground—so weak a creature am I—as it would a young and tender plant. Nor was I able to use this for my profit with the exception of a very few drops which came to me in the form of words of great import, words which my natural intelligence has never been able fully to understand.

“Quite overcome I asked the meaning of all this, and then Thy ever-watchful tenderness, O my God, raised me up with its accustomed sweetness from my state of depression, strengthening my soul with these words, ‘Although, for the moment, this deluge seems to you profitless, I will keep you close to My Heart so that I may fill you with My own Spirit, not all at once, but gently and sweetly at different times according to the measure of your capacity.’ I can bear witness, O Lord my God, to Thy perfect fidelity to Thy promise. Each morning, for four consecutive days, Thou didst inspire me, at a convenient time, with some part of this treatise so that I could write with great clearness and precision, as if from memory and without the least fatigue, things to which I had never before given a thought.

“Yet there was always this limitation, that, after I had written a sufficiently long portion of the treatise it was impossible for me, even though I applied my whole

mind to the task, to write a single word more until the next day when words came again easily and abundantly as before. Thus didst Thou instruct me and moderate my ardour."

Gertrude concludes by giving thanks to God for allowing her not only to enjoy His intimate friendship but also to spread abroad the knowledge of His favours for the benefit of others. It is clear, too, from this passage, that our Lord inspired what she wrote either by direct revelation or by special lights granted to her in prayer.

Those who prepared the saint's writings for publication after her death, write in confirmation of this in the prologue to the *Herald of Divine Love*, "The Holy Ghost Who breathes where, as, and how He wills, chooses freely the place of His abode, and disposes circumstances in the way most advantageous to many, in manifesting Himself by His inspirations. Of this we have an example in this servant of God (Gertrude) into whose soul grace flowed unceasingly, but who was only occasionally moved to communicate these favours to others. Hence this book was written at different times: the first part being begun eight years after the graces it describes were received; while the second was only finished after the lapse of twenty years."

When the part written by the saint herself was com-

pleted,* she humbly recommended it to God, and received this consoling answer, "If anyone reads this book for his own spiritual progress, I will draw him to Myself in such a way that it will seem as if I held the book for him, and united Myself to his action. Now, when two persons read together from the same book, they can feel each other's breath; so will I receive the breath of his desires, and emit upon him the breath of My Divinity, so that My Spirit shall renew his heart within him."

As to the second part, which was dictated by the saint, our Lord told her that it was to be a means of enlightening many. However, as the Abbess Gertrude Hackeborn who had enjoined her to write was dead, and her successor did not insist upon it, Gertrude begged our Lord to prevent her secretary from making any further record of the favours she confided to her. But her Divine Master was not to be thus defrauded of the good He was designing for His future followers, and He replied, "Do you not know that he who is constrained by My Will is constrained beyond all obedience? Why, then, are you disturbed, since you know it to be My Will that this book should be written? It is I who am urging on the writer, and I will aid her faithfully; for I can most assuredly preserve intact what belongs to Me

* Only Book II. of the *Herald of Divine Love* was written by St Gertrude's own hand.

alone." It was then that Gertrude asked our Lord what title she should give the book, and He answered that she should call it the *Herald of Divine Love*, because He intended those who read it to taste in it something of the superabounding sweetness of the love of God for man.

Hearing this, Gertrude, who was steeped in the chivalric spirit of the age, bethought herself that heralds always have their messages accredited by some high authority. She asked our Lord what credentials He would give to a book for which He had chosen such a title. "In virtue of My Divinity," He replied, "to all who read this book with right faith, humble devotion and pious gratitude, and who seek for edification in its pages, I will give the remission of venial sins, great spiritual consolation, and a heart disposed to receive yet greater graces."

The *Herald of Divine Love*, as it has come down to us, is divided into five parts. The first contains a panegyric of the saint and various testimonies to her sanctity, written after her death. The second was penned by her own hand, "at the bidding of the Holy Ghost," as her biographer notes; the third, dictated by her, relates the graces and favours she was wont to receive from our Lord; the fourth records the heavenly visitations granted to her on certain feasts. In the fifth are found the revelations made to her concerning the souls

in purgatory and her own death, besides a short account of her last days on earth.

Our Lord made the following promise with regard to this book :—“ I will penetrate the words of the book with My Divine love, and will render them fruitful ; for they have been written by My inspiration. If any one comes to Me wishing to read it for ‘ love of my love ’ I will show him the passages most useful to him. On the other hand, if anyone seeks to read it from a motive of vanity or curiosity, I will not hesitate to bring him to confusion.”

Gertrude saw our Lord pressing the book to His Sacred Heart in order to penetrate it through and through with His spirit. She begged that her work might be free from all error, whereat He extended His hand and made over it the sign of the cross, promising that it should assist the salvation of all who read it. She learned further that there were three things which made her book specially dear to God : its manifestation of the sweetness of Divine Love ; of the writer’s confidence and good will ; and of the gratuitous goodness of God.

Our Lord concluded His communications on this subject by saying, “ I wish, moreover, that this book may have, as it were, My holy life and conversation for its binding ; the jewels of My five Wounds for its ornaments ; and that it may be sealed with the gifts of the

Holy Spirit, as with seven seals, so that none can take it out of My hands." It will be shown in the next chapter how Gertrude's writings have the special characteristic of making our Lord stand forth to the almost total exclusion of her own personality.

Besides giving an account of her own spiritual life in the *Herald of Divine Love*, Gertrude also wrote *The Book of Special Grace*, recording the favours vouchsafed to St Mechtilde. The latter confided her experiences to Gertrude, who wrote an account of them for future reference. It was not until the task was nearly completed that the elder saint found out what was being done, and her humility led her to ask our Lord not to allow it. But He reassured Mechtilde, telling her that He was responsible for the record and that He guaranteed its usefulness and fidelity to truth.

Quite unconsciously Gertrude furnishes a proof of her own part in the transaction. "This book has been written," she says, "because the writer fears that after Dame Mechtilde's death, the monastery of Helfta will never possess such another as she." Now it was just at this time that, both within and without the convent, Gertrude's own reputation was at its height. No one but herself could have been unaware of this fact, for she was already esteemed by all as even more holy than St Mechtilde. This opinion was confirmed by our Lord in

a revelation made to a pious person,* to whom He said, "I have done great things in Mechtilde; but in Gertrude I will accomplish things yet greater."

In addition to the two books already mentioned, the saint left in writing many beautiful prayers, and a series of *Exercises* to help devotion in others. The *Prayers of St Gertrude* are too well known to need description; her *Exercises*, though not so widely distributed, are equally beautiful. They are seven in number—one, probably, intended for each day of the week—and they embrace the whole work of the sanctification of the soul. The first is a renewal of baptismal innocence; the last a preparation for death; and though three of them refer to the religious life, the others contain acts of praise, love, and thanksgiving, suitable to any state.

The learned Benedictine, Dom Guéranger, speaks of the *Exercises* thus, "The understanding is enlarged and enlightened by her pure and elevated doctrine, and yet St Gertrude never lectures or preaches; the heart is touched and melted and yet St Gertrude only speaks to God; the soul judges itself, condemns itself, renews itself by compunction; and yet St Gertrude has made no effort to move or convict it. . . .

"This child of the thirteenth century, buried in a

* Probably another Mechtilde, a holy beguine of Madebourg, who used often to visit the monastery at Helfta, and is supposed by some to have died there.

monastery of Suabia, preceded Dante in the paths of spiritual poetry. Sometimes her soul breaks forth into tender and touching lyrics ; sometimes the fire which consumes her bursts into a transport of fervour ; sometimes her feelings clothe themselves instinctively in a dramatic form ; sometimes she stops short in her sublimest flights, and she, who almost rivals the seraphim, descends to earth, but only to prepare herself for a still higher flight. It is as though there were an unending struggle between her humility which held her prostrate in the dust, and the aspirations of her soul towards Jesus, Who was drawing her, and Who had lavished on her such exceeding love."

CHAPTER VII

THE SACRED HEART

IT seems to be one of the characteristics of God's ways with men to prepare long and silently beforehand for any great work which concerns His glory and the good of souls. The supreme example of this is in the thirty years' Hidden Life of the Son of God, told by the Gospel in one sentence, "He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them." Yet, those silent years were as efficacious for man's salvation as the three years of active public life which culminated in the sacrifice of the Cross. So is it in the life of His mystical body.

So again has it been with the doctrine and devotion connected with the Sacred Heart. From the days when our Blessed Lady worshipped with awe and love the Heart of her Infant God, and the Beloved Disciple leant upon that same Heart at the Last Supper, down to our own times, there have never been wanting holy

souls whose special devotion has been to the Sacred Heart.

But, from the time when our Lord taught St Gertrude its secrets, and bade her write them down, the Heart of Jesus has always been the object of special veneration and love in the Benedictine Order. When, four centuries later, our Lord made known His desire that a more public and solemn devotion should be paid to His Divine Heart, He made choice of the holy Visitation nun Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque and the Ven. Claude de la Colombière to accomplish His designs. But His revelations to them only amplified and confirmed what He had long before taught St Gertrude.

Moreover, anyone who compares the writings of St Gertrude with the titles under which the Sacred Heart is invoked in the litany authoritatively published by Pope Leo XIII, cannot fail to be struck by the similarity of the figures under which the love and goodness of the Heart of Jesus are described by the scholarly Pontiff and the humble Benedictine nun.

Thus, in connection with the petition "Heart of Jesus, source of life and holiness," might be taken the vision granted to the saint during Mass on the Saturday of Ember Week in Advent. Our Lord appeared to her full of sweetness and grace, while there came forth from His sacred Person a life-giving virtue. As often on like occasions, Gertrude began to pray for

others, and she was told that each soul she prayed for had received a golden tube by which it might draw from the Sacred Heart all the graces of which it was in need. By the golden tube was signified a good will, directed towards God in fervent desires by which men can obtain greater riches than the whole world can offer.

Of those who used the tubes, some received the stream of grace straight from the Sacred Heart, while others obtained it indirectly through our Lord's Hands. The latter were such as aspired after virtue according to their own ideas and inclinations; the former abandoned themselves entirely to the good pleasure of God, desiring to do His will, whether in things temporal or spiritual.

Another of the invocations of the litany is exemplified by the vision on the feast of St Gregory the Great, whom she saw during the chanting of his office, kneeling before God and praying for the needs of the Church. "Heart of Jesus, rich unto all who call upon Thee," the great pontiff might have said, as our Lord with loving kindness offered to him His Divine Heart that he might take from it all he saw to be necessary for the Church.

Gertrude was, as it were, consumed with the desire of making our Lord's love for men better and more widely known. After she had received the Beloved Disciple as her special protector and guide, the Apostle often appeared to her and they held sweet converse together.

She ventured to ask him why he, who had rested on Christ's bosom, and who, after our Lady, knew better than any other the secrets of His Divine Heart, had never written anything to make it more known and loved.

St John explained that his mission was to present to the first ages of the Church the doctrine of the Incarnation, a doctrine containing inexhaustible food for the minds and hearts of men until the end of time. He added that, as to the love of the Word made Flesh, manifested by the beating of the Sacred Heart, "it is reserved for the last ages to make it known; so that the world, carried away by follies, may regain a little of the warmth of early charity by learning of the love of the Sacred Heart." And when, in her humility, Gertrude did not wish her writings to be published, our Lord expressly told her that He had chosen her "to be the light of nations, and to carry His salvation to the ends of the earth."

It is certain that the revelations made to St Gertrude and her fervent desires and prayers for the spread of God's kingdom on earth, prepared the way for the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus now to be found in every part of the Catholic world. The commendation of the whole human race to that Divine Heart made in June 1899 and spoken of by Pope Leo XIII as "the greatest act in his pontificate," was the culminating

point of the devotion in these latter days and Gertrude's name is connected with this in a wonderful and interesting manner.

God's instrument in inspiring the Pope to procure this act of universal homage to His Divine Son, was a Good Shepherd nun, Sister Mary of the Divine Heart. To her our Lord gave St Gertrude as a special patron and sister, instructing her to keep herself closely united with the Benedictine saint.*

After this St Gertrude appeared to her more than once, and encouraged her to make known to Pope Leo what our Lord desired. By this spiritual tie did God give to Gertrude "the desires of her heart"; for, as Mother Mary's biographer remarks, the consecration of all mankind to the Sacred Heart crowned "the grand work of which the contemplative of Eisleben had, in some way, laid the first stone."

So intimate were the relations of Gertrude with the Sacred Heart, that, in studying her life, her own personality is lost sight of and attention is concentrated on the character of Christ our Lord alone. In the book written by her own hand there are many examples to the point.

It happened that Gertrude, having committed some fault one evening began to pray as usual before dawn the next morning. Our Lord appeared to her, stripped

* See "Mother Mary of the Divine Heart." Ch. VII.

(Burns, Oates & Washbourne).

of all good and without any strength, so that her conscience smote her and she reproached herself for allowing her heart to contract any stain when it was the chosen dwelling of the Author of all purity. But our Lord consoled her saying, "When a helpless invalid, who has been carried out into the sun, is overtaken by a sudden storm, he can do nothing except look forward to a return of the sunshine. So it is with Me. Yielding to your love, I have chosen to dwell in your heart, however violent the storms raised by your unruly inclinations. At such times I wait until your repentance restores, as it were, calm weather, and you enter the port of humility." In relating this, the saint bursts into fervent thanksgiving, begging our Lord Himself to supply a fitting return for His marvellous condescension towards her.

One feast of the Purification, Gertrude found a copy of a prayer which pleased her greatly. It ran as follows: "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, grant that I may seek after Thee with my whole heart. Let me live only for Thee, my dearest and most loving Friend; let my soul sigh for Thee, Who art my only happiness. Imprint, O most merciful Saviour, Thy Sacred Wounds upon my heart with Thy Precious Blood, so that I may read therein, at once, both Thy sufferings and Thy love. Let the thought of Thy Sacred Wounds be ever present to my heart, to excite in me compassion

for Thy sorrows, and to increase in me the fire of Thy Divine Love. Teach me the nothingness of all created things, and let me feel no sweetness but that of Thy love."

Shortly afterwards, Gertrude felt that the favours she had asked for in this prayer, which she often recited, were actually granted to her. "I knew spiritually," she says, addressing herself as usual to our Blessed Lord, "that Thou hadst imprinted on my heart the adorable marks of Thy Sacred Wounds, and that by them Thou hadst cured the wounds of my soul and bestowed on me a heavenly beverage."

Five years later, Gertrude records a further favour which she received in Advent, and tells why she records it, "I asked a certain person to add to the prayer she said before a crucifix these words for my intention, 'O Lord, by Thy pierced Heart, pierce her heart with the arrow of Thy love, so that nothing earthly may remain therein, but that it may be entirely filled with the virtue of Thy Divinity.' Moved, as I believe, by these words, on the third Sunday of Advent, at the very moment of receiving Thy Body and Blood, Thou didst awaken in me a desire which broke forth thus, 'Lord, I confess that, by my own merits, I am not worthy to receive the least of Thy graces; but by the merits and desires of all here present, I beseech Thee to pierce my heart with the arrow of Thy love.'

“Soon I perceived that my words had touched Thy Divine Heart, both by the interior sweetness which I experienced, and by a visible sign in a picture of the Crucifixion. For, indeed, having received the Bread of Life and returned to my place to make my thanksgiving, I seemed to see a ray of light, like an arrow, issue from the wound on the right side of the image which was painted on the book before me. It seemed to come forth and retire, and then presently come forth again, sweetly drawing to itself all my desires.

“On the following Wednesday, when the faithful honour in a special way the love Thou hast shown in Thy adorable Incarnation, I was applying myself, though with little fervour, to this devotion. Suddenly Thou didst appear to me, inflicting a wound upon my heart and saying, ‘May all your affections be united here, so that all your feelings, whether of pleasure, hope, joy, sorrow, or fear, may be rooted in my love.’”

After sorrowing over the imperfect use she made of so great a favour, the saint exclaims, “O my God! Thou knowest my most secret thoughts; Thou knowest then, why I have written these things, not on account of, but rather against my desire. It is because I have profited so little by all Thy favours that I cannot believe they were bestowed upon me for myself alone, seeing that Thy Eternal Wisdom cannot be mistaken. Therefore, O Divine Giver of all good gifts, Who hast

freely bestowed upon me, all unworthy as I am, the riches of Thy bounty, grant that those who read this, may be touched with compassion towards Thee; that, learning the zeal for souls which made Thee leave so precious a gem in my corrupt heart, they may praise and adore Thy mercy, saying, 'Praise, glory, honour and benediction be to Thee for ever, O Eternal Father, from whom all things proceed. Amen!' Thus, in some sort of way, will reparation be made for what is wanting in my dispositions."

But the more the saint humbled herself, the more did our Lord pour out His choicest graces upon her. Once, when the nuns were keeping the feast of the dedication of their church, Christ gave His Heart to her as a dwelling, saying, "Since you constantly offer Me your heart, which is the noblest part of your being, I have determined, in return, to offer you Mine."

Gertrude, in all humility, answered, "O Lord, Thou knowest well that if I have done anything to please Thee, this also is Thy gift." To which our Lord replied, "It is according to My Divine Nature to lavish gifts on those whom I have excited to good by spiritual consolations; and, if they conform themselves to the good pleasure of My Divine Heart, I am constrained to conform Myself, in return, to the good pleasure of their hearts."

On another anniversary of the same feast, Gertrude

was again admitted into the sanctuary of the Sacred Heart, and this time she received permission to distribute its sweetness to whomsoever she would. Characteristically, she at once made use of the favour to obtain from our Lord graces for certain enemies of the convent who were, at the time, molesting a farmhouse belonging to it. She afterwards learnt that all who had received these graces were touched with sincere repentance and were reconciled to God.

One very consoling truth taught to Gertrude by the Sacred Heart was that when we pray for one another, God does not always send consolations to those we pray for, but the grace they receive is in the pain and sorrow and other trials which fashion their souls more and more to His likeness. Though this is hidden from them at the time, they will be proportionally overwhelmed with consolation later on, according as they have faithfully striven to bear patiently all sorts of adversity for the love of God.

Gertrude was sometimes assailed by doubts as to whether these favours really came from God, and at such moments she had recourse to St Mechtilde, who, on one occasion, received in prayer the following assurance from our Lord Himself, "I have united My Heart to Gertrude's in so close a union that her spirit is one with Mine. The harmony and understanding existing among the different members of the body

cannot be greater than that which exists between her soul and Mine. The moment a man has willed in his heart a movement of his hands, they accomplish his desire ; and when he wishes mentally to look at something his eyes at once turn towards it. In the same manner do I act with Gertrude. I have chosen her for My dwelling, and her will is so united to that of My Heart that she is the instrument by which I work out My Divine Will."

To another holy person our Lord said of Gertrude, "I have chosen her for My dwelling because I see with delight that what others love in her is My work. Even such as know little of spiritual things love in her My exterior gifts at least, keenness of intellect, for instance, or eloquence. Know also that I have, as it were, exiled her from her family and brought her away from all her relations, so that none might love her with a merely natural affection, but that I Myself might be the sole cause of the love and esteem others have for her."

Gertrude was told of these revelations, and then her doubts and anxiety gave place to an overwhelming gratitude. She asked her Divine Spouse how it was He could overlook all her faults, seeing that if she willingly accepted all He accomplished in her it was certainly through no virtue of her own, but only another effect of His bounty towards her. Our Lord comforted her with this comparison, "When a person cannot read

some small writing he uses reading-glasses to make the letters appear larger. Nothing is changed in the book, but the instrument used makes the alteration. In like manner, whatever defect remains in you is corrected and supplied for by the tenderness of My mercy."

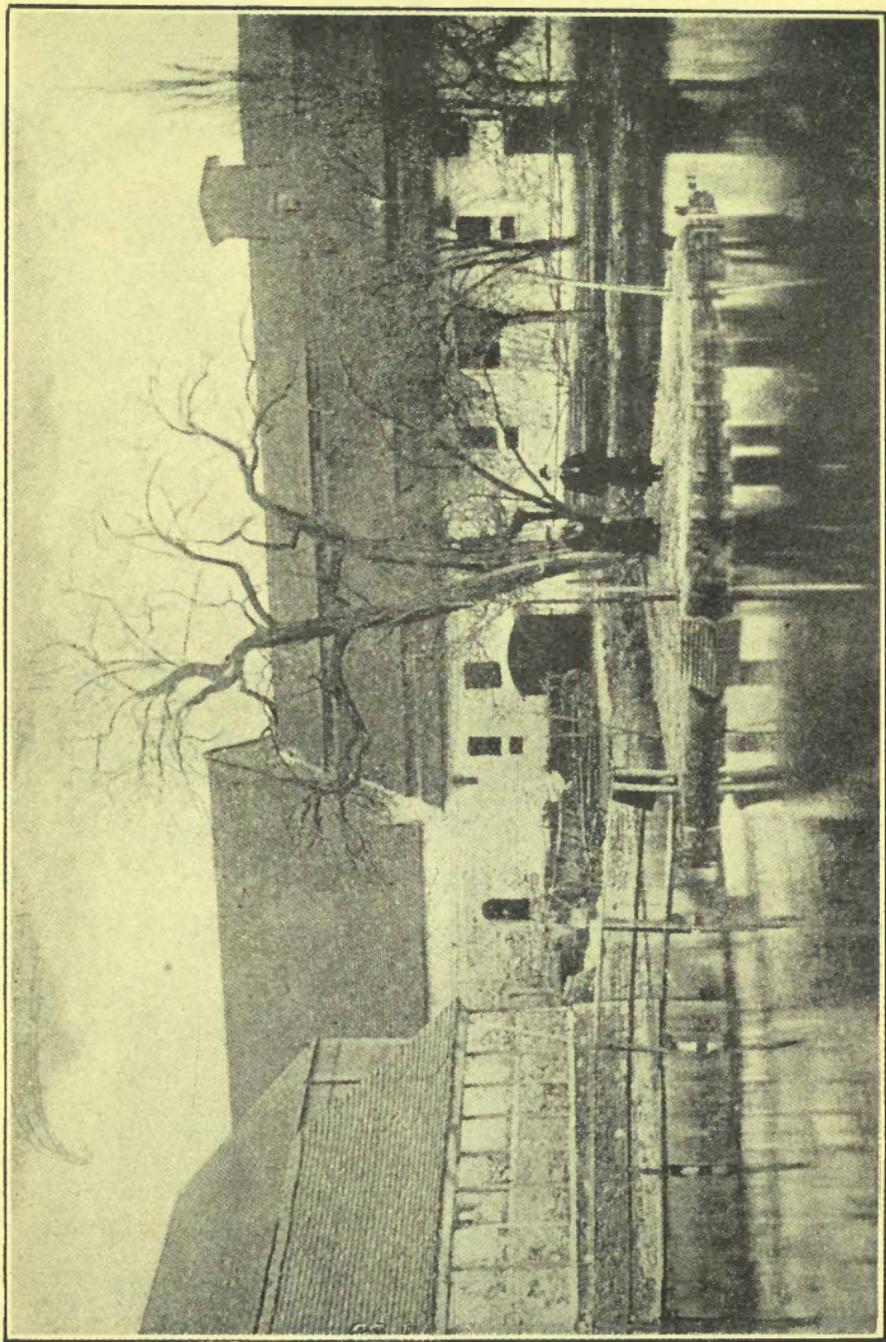
On another occasion, being asked what virtue in Gertrude was particularly pleasing to Him, our Lord replied, "It is the peace which fills her heart." In the last chapter of her book, while enumerating God's favours to her, she especially mentions this. Then, breaking out into a rapture of gratitude and love, she exclaims, "I render thanks to Thee for what is Thine own, O Lord! And by the melody of the harp of Thy Divine Heart, whose cords are touched by the movement of the Holy Spirit, I will make sweet music before Thee, and entone in Thine honour a loving canticle, saying, 'To Thee, O Lord God, Eternal Father, be everlasting praise and thanksgiving from all that is in heaven, on earth, or under the earth; from all that has been, is, or yet shall be, for ever. A men.'"

CHAPTER VIII

THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS

WHATEVER may have been the special and particular attraction of any of the saints, not one has been without a tender devotion to the Passion of Christ. His own Blessed Mother is our model in this, as in all else. Through Mary Jesus came to us, and through Mary we must go to Jesus, if we would fulfil His dying wish. Hence we find all the saints looking to Mary as their Mother, and longing to bear some part in the sufferings of both the Mother and her Son.

The common Catholic usage of dedicating Friday to the Passion of our Lord was observed with great fidelity by Gertrude, who never allowed the day to pass without doing some act in memory of the great mystery of our salvation. One Friday, as evening approached, she realised that unusual occupations had caused the practice to slip from her memory. Casting a look of



THE MONASTERY AT HELFTA
(Showing farm buildings on left)

sorrow and regret on the crucifix she cried out, "O my sweetest Creator and lover! what torments Thou hast suffered to-day for my sake, and I, unfaithful that I am, have let it pass in all sorts of occupations without devoutly recalling at each hour what Thou, my Lord and Saviour hast done for me, forgetting that Thou, the Life who givest life to all, hast died for love of my love!"

But from the crucifix came this answer: "That which you neglected I supplied for you. Each hour I gathered into My heart what you ought to have placed in yours and I waited with impatience for the moment when you would address this prayer to Me. In union with it I will offer to God, My Father, all that I have supplied for you during this day because, unless you had had the intention of doing it, all that I have done could not profit you." "Could anyone fail to recognise in this the fidelity of God's love for men," asks the saint, "since He accepts a single thought of regret, and for it supplies all our negligences in the sight of His Heavenly Father?"

St Gertrude knew that the mysteries of our Redemption are not circumscribed by time and that they are as really and truly ours to-day as they were to those who witnessed them. The liturgy of the Church is essentially dramatic, and in her ceremonies she enacts before the kneeling worshippers the great

facts of Christian history. As Cardinal Wiseman beautifully expresses it :

“This principle, which will be found to animate the Church service of every other season, rules most remarkably that of Holy Week, and gives it soul and life. It is not intended to be merely commemorative or historical ; it is, strictly speaking, representative. The Church puts herself into mourning as though her Spouse were now undergoing His cruel fate ; she weeps over Jerusalem as if the measure of her iniquity were not filled up, and the punishment which has overtaken her might yet be averted . . . Whoever looks not at these functions in this sense, and reads not the offices sung or recited during them with this feeling, will certainly neither relish nor understand them.”

To Gertrude this love of the liturgy came naturally as the result of her having been in the cloister from her tenderest years. It grew with her growth, and increased as each year she was able to take her part more and more fully in the solemn chanting of the Divine Office. This explains many passages in her life, where she seems positively to live over again, and be present at the Gospel scenes recorded in the different festivals of the Church's year. The following examples from the fourth book of the *Herald of Divine Love* illustrate Gertrude's method of spending Passiontide :

“One Passion Sunday she offered herself body and

soul to our Lord to suffer and fulfil in both one and the other whatever might be His Holy Will. Our Saviour accepted the offering, inspiring her at the same time to salute the different members of His Sacred Body which suffered for us during His Passion, and to unite her will to His by saying in union with His prayer during the agony in the garden: 'Father, not my will but Thine be done!'"

These devotions she practised faithfully during the week, and on Palm Sunday she again begged our Lord to teach her how she could best go forth to meet Him as He approached the day of His Sacred Passion. In answer to this prayer she was instructed, among other things, to provide an ass for our Saviour to ride, by acknowledging with deep contrition that she had often failed to follow the path of reason, and had no more sense and appreciation of God's favours than an irrational animal would have. She was also told to devote herself especially to practising the virtues of humility, patience and charity, of which our Lord gave so marvellous an example in His sufferings.

At Holy Communion that day our Divine Saviour appeared to the saint bearing in His hand a scourge of three cords with which He cleansed her heart from the dust of human frailty and negligence. An anecdote belonging to the same Palm Sunday shows with what purity of intention Gertrude always acted. Her bodily

weakness was so great that, on account of the long ceremonies, she was asked to take some slight refreshment after the procession, before she assisted at the chanting of the Passion. At first Gertrude would not hear of such a thing, but when, as usual, she turned to consult our Lord, He settled the matter for her by these words: "Refresh yourself, my beloved, in union with the love with which I, when stretched on the cross, refused, after tasting it, to drink the wine mingled with gall and myrrh which was offered to me."

At once the saint yielded, and gave thanks to God for His condescension towards her. Thereupon He presented His Sacred Heart to her, saying: "I present you herein the desire which made Me refuse to drink that I might give you to drink. Drink then freely what I, a skilful physician, have prepared for you. This wine, mingled with myrrh and gall, was given to me that I might suffer less; but the desire of suffering yet more for men prevented Me from drinking it. You, on the contrary, must take with the same love whatever is convenient for you, so that your life may be prolonged for My service.

"But you must consider three things in taking this cup. First, perform the action with joy, for my greater glory; this is indicated by the wine. Second, accept these conveniences of life only in order to be able to suffer longer for love of Me; this is symbolised by the

myrrh which has the property of preserving from corruption. Third, be willing, for My love, to be deprived of the joys of heaven, and, as long as it pleases Me, to remain in this valley of tears ; this is the meaning of the gall.

“As long as you accept what comforts or relieves you in this intention, I will take it as if a friend drank a bitter potion offered to another, giving him some delicious nectar instead.”

Gertrude, however, was not content only to offer her refreshment with this intention, but while she took it meditated in her heart the aspiration : “May the virtue of Thy divine love, O most amiable Jesus, incorporate me wholly with Thee!” And this other : “O most loving Jesus, pour forth upon me and preserve in me the effect of the love which overmastered Thee when, on the Cross, instead of drinking the beverage prepared to alleviate Thy pain, Thou didst refuse it for our sakes, so as to suffer yet more. May it penetrate my whole substance, instilling itself into all the powers of my soul and body, to Thy eternal praise and glory, O Lord my God.” Feeling that this prayer was acceptable to our Lord, Gertrude asked if others who took their food with a similar intention would be equally pleasing to Him. He told her that not only would He accept such an offering as food and drink given to Himself when He was in need, but would by means of it kindle a deeper love in their hearts.

The evening of that same day, the saint, mindful of how our Lord left Jerusalem to seek a resting-place with Martha and Mary at Bethany, threw herself at the foot of a crucifix, kissing devoutly the wound in His side and begging Him, by all the prayers which issued from His Sacred Heart, to deign to come into the poor lodging of her soul.

Straightway came the answer: "I am there; what are you going to give Me?" Gertrude hastened to salute Him saying, "Welcome, O my only good, my all, my salvation, welcome! But alas! I have nothing prepared, wretched that I am, which is worthy to be offered to Thy Divine Majesty. Yet, I give Thee all that I have, begging and beseeching Thee to prepare in me Thyself all that Thou wouldst find well-pleasing to Thee."

"If you really desire Me to be quite at home in your heart," replied our Lord, "give Me the key, so that I can take or arrange everything just as it pleases Me, and find there my rest and refreshment."

"And what is this key, dear Lord?" queried the saint.

"Your self-will," He answered.

Her biographer goes on to say that this word of our Saviour made Gertrude understand that if a soul would have Jesus to dwell within her she must abandon herself wholly to His good pleasure and have no will

but His, trusting Him to do everything for her good and accepting from Him all that happens. Then will He take full possession of the soul and accomplish therein all that pleases or delights Him.

Before the following Maundy Thursday Gertrude had urged many others to beg our Lord, through the mystery of His abasement in washing the feet of His Apostles, to purify their hearts and affections as a preparation for receiving him in Holy Communion. As she was kneeling at prayer it was made known to her that her faults and those of all who had acted according to her advice were completely effaced. But the saint was distressed and cried out :

“Alas, my Lord, although I thus instructed others and meant to say the prayer myself, I was so occupied that I neglected it altogether.”

“I accepted the will for the deed,” replied her Divine Master ; and when, at the moment of Holy Communion, Gertrude offered to Him the wishes of all who had recommended themselves to her prayers, He told her that she had thereby enkindled in His Sacred Heart a flame of love for each person she prayed for. The saint’s zeal for souls was at once aglow, and she asked if she might present to our Lord in the same way all the members of the Church militant. As an answer He taught her to make the following fourfold offering on behalf of the souls of others :

First, to praise God for all the creatures made to His image and likeness.

Second, to thank Him for all the benefits men have received or will receive from Him till the end of time.

Third, to grieve over the hindrances raised by man's free will to the operations of God's grace.

Fourth, to intercede for all who labour at their own salvation or at any other good work in which God's glory is involved.

On the Maundy Thursday of another year Gertrude had a vision of our Lord as He was at the Last Supper. He seemed to spend the day in the most extreme anguish and bitterness, with all He was about to suffer continually before Him. Being "the tender Son of a tender Mother," as the saint says, more sensitive to suffering than any other human person, however delicately organised, He trembled and was overcome with fear. It was granted to Gertrude to experience spiritually all that she saw her beloved Master enduring, and so intense was her compassion that her heart became affected and she passed the three last days of Holy Week in a state of extreme physical weakness.

When the clapper sounded—for then, as now, no bells were rung while the Church mourns the death of Christ—it seemed to speak to Gertrude of the agony of her soul's best Friend ; and she withdrew as much as

possible from the company of others to meditate on the sufferings of Jesus, and, as far as she could, to share His pain. For this purpose she offered her heart to our Lord during Tierce to suffer with Him all the bitterness and sorrow He experienced from that hour till His death ; asking that if through human frailty the thought of it for a moment escaped her memory, He would let her feel a sharp pain in her heart which might be a reminder.

Our Lord did not, however, grant her request, but replied : " Such a wish and faithful purpose is amply sufficient. But if you would give Me real delight in your offering, let me have liberty to do with your heart, and enclose in it whatever I please, without choosing whether I shall flood it with joy or bitterness."

Not content with devoutly contemplating our Lord's Passion, Gertrude wished to make Him some return, and one Good Friday received from Him the following instruction, in answer to her request that He would teach her how she might in some way repay Him for all He had suffered for her :

" If anyone sacrifices his own way of thinking or acting, in order to conform to another's opinion, he makes reparation for the thongs which bound Me, and the injuries which I received in prison during the first hours of My Passion.

" He who humbly avows his faults, atones for the

false accusations made against Me, and for My condemnation to death.

“To deprive the senses of what gratifies them, repays Me for what I endured by the cruel scourging, while, to obey those who are fretful and exacting, consoles Me for the pain of wearing the crown of thorns.

“In a dispute, or when anyone is offended, he who makes the first advance towards reconciliation helps Me to carry My cross; while anyone who exerts himself beyond what he can ordinarily do to help others by works of charity, repays Me for what I suffered when, as I was being nailed to the Cross, My muscles were stretched and My bones dislocated in order to make My Hands reach the places prepared for the nails.

“Not to shrink from pain or trouble when it is a question of rescuing another from sin, makes up to Me for My death for man's salvation; and returning a meek answer to reproaches or unkindness, is as pleasing to Me as the act of those who took My Body down from the cross.

“Finally, he who prefers his neighbour to himself, acknowledging that he has a better right to honours, comforts, or other advantages, acts as if he placed Me in the tomb with all honour and reverence.”

During the chanting of the Passion that same morning, Gertrude made the following prayer: “It was given to blessed Joseph of Arimathea to handle

Thy Sacred Body, O Lord! What can I receive, all unworthy as I am?"

At once Christ presented her with His Divine Heart, under the form of a silver thurible, from which arose clouds of fragrant incense. When the priest began the prayers for all classes of men, within and without the Church, the saint saw these petitions mingling with the smoke from the thurible, and, in union with the pleadings of the Sacred Heart, rising as a sweet odour before God the Father for the salvation of men.

"Whoever hides his sufferings and adversities in the mysteries of my Passion," said our Lord, "shall be strengthened by the example of My different sufferings as he tries to imitate Me. And I will give him, not only what he merits himself, but also all that I merited by My patience and My other virtues."

When Gertrude asked whether devotion to the crucifix was pleasing in God's sight He replied that it was; but that all the testimonies of love, respect and veneration offered to His image on the Cross, would not be altogether pleasing and acceptable unless they were accompanied by real efforts to imitate the example given by Him in His Passion.

It was ever the old lesson which the Beloved Disciple expressed in the words: "My little children, let us not love in word nor in tongue, but in deed and in truth." So, on another occasion when Gertrude's intense

devotion to the crucifix and her anxiety to have one always near her, led her to fear lest she was giving way to a merely natural affection which might impede the spiritual operations of God in her soul, our Lord consoled her thus :

“ Be not afraid, My beloved, that this will hinder the spiritual favours you receive, since I alone am the object of all your thoughts and desires. Veneration shown to My cross is an effect of love for Me. But it is not enough to be content with an image of the Cross unless you recall the love and fidelity with which I endured the bitterness of My Passion. Nor is it sufficient merely to satisfy some devotion unless you also study how best to imitate the example I gave amidst My grievous sufferings.”

On other occasions the lights vouchsafed to Gertrude were for the instruction of others rather than for herself. It once happened, for instance, that a procession was ordered for the purpose of obtaining from God better weather. As the religious of Helfta re-entered their choir behind the crucifix which was borne before them, the saint received a special light to understand why a processional cross is always carried at the head of those who take part in ceremonies of this nature.

Our Lord, as it were, pleads from His Cross for the needs of the faithful, saying : “ Behold, I come with My army to supplicate Thee, O Eternal Father, under the

same form in which I reconciled the human race with Thee."

Gertrude then saw God the Father receive these words with as much complacency as if He thereby obtained a satisfaction a hundred times greater than the sins of the whole world. Taking up the image of His crucified Son into the clouds, He proclaimed it the sign of the covenant which He had made with the earth.

As to the fruit to be reaped from devotion to Christ crucified, many revelations made to Gertrude have been recorded. One day as she held her crucifix in her hands, contemplating it with great devotion, she learned interiorly that if anyone only looks at the Cross of Christ with affection and respect, God regards him with such mercy and goodness that his soul reflects an image causing delight in the whole court of heaven. Moreover, his loving act merits a rich reward, which is stored up for him in the next world.

Another practice taught to Gertrude by our Lord was to turn frequently towards a crucifix, and in spirit to hear Christ speaking from it thus: "Behold how, for your love, I have been fastened to the cross, despised, naked, torn; My Body covered with wounds; My bones dislocated. Yet My Heart is so eager for your love that, were it necessary for your salvation, I would suffer again for you alone all that I bore for the sins of the whole world."

The saint also tells us that no one can even look at a crucifix without a particular grace arranged by God's Providence, nor can anyone gaze on Christ crucified without receiving thereby some spiritual benefit. In like manner, no one, however feeble his devotion, fails to be regarded favourably by our Lord, so long as he makes an effort to keep in mind the memory of His Sacred Passion.

Gertrude also learned from our Lord that there is more merit in meditation, reading, and vocal prayers which have reference to the Passion, than there is in any others except such as have the contemplation of the Divinity for object. In one of her homely comparisons she says: "Just as it is impossible to handle flour without becoming covered with white dust, so it is impossible to give a thought to the Passion of Christ without deriving some fruit from it. Let us, then, endeavour to reflect constantly on it, so that it may become honey to our lips, music to our ears, and joy to our heart."

The devotion of Gertrude had a tender as well as a strong and practical side. Unable to bear the sight of the iron nails fastening her beloved Master to the cross, she one day drew them out from her crucifix and put in their stead sweet-smelling cloves. All the following night she was kept awake by the burning ardour of her love and her constant meditations on Jesus crucified.

As she recalled with a certain pleasure her loving act,

she spoke thus to our Lord : “ Did it give Thee pleasure, O sweetest Lover, when I drew the iron nails from Thy Sacred Hands and Feet and put in their place aromatic flowers ? ” He at once replied : “ I was so pleased with this act of loving tenderness that in return I poured forth the precious balm of My Divinity into the wounds of your sins, and the saints will for ever delight therein.”

Then came the usual question : “ And wilt Thou do the same, My Lord, for all who practise this devotion ? ” But this her Divine Master did not promise. “ Those who do it with devotion like yours will receive a similar reward,” He said, “ and others who do it to follow your example will have a proportionately less reward.”

Then the saint took her crucifix, and kissing it repeatedly, clasped it to her heart. Feeling faint after her long vigil, she soon laid it down, saying : “ Farewell, my Beloved, and good-night. Permit me now to take a little sleep so that I may recover my strength, for I am well nigh exhausted by meditating so long with Thee.” Turning away she composed herself to sleep, but our Lord, extending His right Hand towards her, and bending down from the Cross, said : “ Listen, My beloved, and I will sing you yet one more canticle of love.”

In a melodious voice He chanted some words to the tone of St Gregory’s hymn, *Rex Christe, Factor Omnium*; and then told Gertrude to ask whatever she wished and it would be granted to her. She prayed, accordingly,

for several special intentions, and was immediately heard. Again and again did Jesus chant the same words, exhorting her each time to pray, so that she had not a moment for sleep and was completely exhausted when, just as dawn was breaking, she closed her eyes for the first time that night.

Even then, her biographer tells us, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is always near to those who love Him, appeared to her in her sleep and marvellously refreshed her. Thus sweetly restored to strength, she returned humble thanks for God's wonderful and gracious condescension towards her.

These hours of consolation were, however, sometimes interrupted by times of trial and desolation. It happened one year, on the Saturday before Quinquagesima, that Gertrude had, more than usual, been filled with spiritual joy ; but towards evening, some trifling incident, which she knew, nevertheless, to be of no moment, cast her into the deepest trouble and deprived her of sleep during the night.

Next morning at Matins, she begged our Lord to relieve her, but He told her that, when He sent her interior desolation of spirit, it was as if He looked into her heart and consoled Himself by her love and goodwill. Thereupon the saint prayed to know what homage she could offer in reparation for the sins committed so heedlessly during the three days of Carnival. Our Lord

replied: "You can offer Me nothing more agreeable than to bear patiently, in memory of My Passion, all the pains, interior or exterior, which come upon you, and to force yourself to do just what your self-will most shrinks from."

At Tierce the same day, Gertrude had a vision of our Lord as He was when bound to the pillar between two guards, one of whom struck Him with withies covered with sharp thorns, while the other used a whip with lashes full of hard knots. Both struck the Sacred Face, which was reduced to such a state that Gertrude's heart melted with compassion, and she shed torrents of tears each time she recalled the memory of it.

The side of the Divine Face which was struck with thorns appeared to the saint so torn, that the very pupil of the eye had not been spared, while the other side was all livid and swollen from the strokes of the knotted scourge. It seemed to Gertrude also that our Blessed Lord, in His excessive pain, moved His Sacred Face to one side, but, as He turned away from the first executioner, the second only struck him the more furiously.

At last He looked upon her saying: "Have you not read what is written of Me: 'We have seen Him as it were a leper?'" The saint, unable to bear any longer the sight of His pain, cried out: "Ah! dearest Lord, how can I soothe the cruel agony of Thy face, so wounded and withal so delicate?" Jesus replied: "By

devoutly pondering in your heart My Sacred Passion, and by a loving sorrow for your sins, joined to fervent prayer for the conversion of sinners."

Gertrude also understood that the executioner whom she had seen striking our Lord with thorns, represented people in the world who sin publicly; and the one who struck Him with a knotted scourge represented religious who openly break their rule, the shamelessness of both being symbolised by the blows being given to our Lord's most Sacred Face. She was also told that the history of the Passion is given in the Gospels, where the scourging at the pillar is twice mentioned, not only to inflame the devotion of the faithful, but also in order that the sufferings of Christ may be offered to God the Father throughout the universal Church for the expiation of sin.

During the conventual Mass, our Saviour spoke to Gertrude in the words of the Introit: "Be unto me a God, a protector, and a place of refuge," addressing her as if He had need of her assistance at a time when men so openly outraged Him: "Be you My protector, My beloved, and defend Me as far as you can from the insults heaped upon Me, especially at this time. For, since I am rejected by men, I will take refuge with you." In response to this appeal, the saint so completely lost herself in God that she became unconscious of what was going on around her.

Yet it would hardly be correct to say that the special attraction of Gertrude's devotion was the Sacred Passion. It seems, rather, that she was one of those souls Father Faber speaks of, "to whom the supernatural world is a genuine home," and "who, in devotion, follow the calendar of the Church and honour most the feast under whose shadow they are sitting," honour it too with "an admiration which seems to other souls, not so constituted, almost to do injustice to the season that is past."*

All Catholic devotions are gathered up and unified by one great central devotion—the Incarnation of the Son of God. This permeated the whole of Gertrude's life, and explains the many-sidedness of her spiritual attractions: her love for the Sacred Heart, the Precious Blood, the Five Most Sacred Wounds, all met in love for our Lord Incarnate, the Mediator between God and man, through whom our thoughts are lifted at once to the Blessed Trinity and find their eternal resting-place in the Beatific Vision.

* See "Bethlehem," Chap. v., by Fr. Faber.

CHAPTER IX

INTIMATE RELATIONS WITH THE MOTHER OF GOD

EACH Christmastide Gertrude, like the Magi of old, "found the Child with Mary His Mother," and year by year their intercourse with her became more familiar. She herself notes how her fidelity one year led to greater graces the next.

One Christmas Eve she begged God to accept all she did in praise of the Blessed Trinity; and, as the bells rang out for Matins, our Lord answered her thus: "These bells announce the feast of My Nativity, and I desire that all you do this day—singing, praying, reading, meditating, working, eating, sleeping—all may be sweet-sounding praises of the adorable Trinity, in union with the love which kept My Will ever one with the Will of My Eternal Father."

Afterwards the saint invited the Infant Jesus to make Himself a home in her heart and to come and dwell there. Her request was not only granted, but by His presence within her our Lord purified all her senses, exterior and interior, and sanctified them by uniting them to His.

It is the custom in the Benedictine Order to sing the Martyrology announcing the Birth of our Lord with very great solemnity, and at Helfta it was done with special devotion. On this occasion Gertrude was favoured with a vision similar to one which had been previously granted to St Mechtilde. She saw our Lord seated in the Chapter Room,* surrounded by a multitude of angels. The usual blessing having been asked, as the abbess said the response, our Lord extended His Hand in benediction. Then, when the words announcing the Birth of Jesus Christ were sung, all the angels, filled with ineffable joy, prostrated to adore their Lord and King.

The nuns also prostrated, according to custom, for the chanting of the Miserere, and the Angel Guardian of each one offered her heart to God. Gertrude saw our Lord take from each angel what appeared like a twisted cord† and place it in His bosom. When the psalms

* In Benedictine Monasteries the Office of Prime is usually recited, partly in the Choir, and partly in the Chapter Room (Cf. Ch. III. supra). In some, however, the whole Office, together with the Martyrology, is said in the Choir. The former usage was universally observed in the thirteenth century.

† The idea contained in this symbol is that of a pledge of mutual affection. A twisted cord was a common heraldic device in Germany and France for embellishing the "shields" of abbesses or even of distinguished ladies who were widows. A similar device is often seen surrounding the coat of arms of abbeys or monasteries.

were finished and the sisters had again taken their seats, two angels set a golden table before the Son of God, Who took the cords from His Heart and untwisted them. As He laid each upon the table, all the words of the psalms and prayers recited by the community appeared as precious stones strung upon them, emitting soft rays of light which were reflected back to our Lord's Sacred Heart.

During the reading of the names of those appointed to chant in choir, or perform different offices during the week, our Saviour lovingly saluted those who listened attentively and gladly to what they had to do. He sweetly consoled others who were grieving because their names were omitted, so that Gertrude ventured to say: "If the community knew of these consolations, they would surely all be sorry not to hear their names read out." But our Lord explained to her that He would accept their good desires, adding: "If anyone whose name is read out, asks Me as she bows her head in assent to help her to accomplish her office perfectly, My goodness will so overflow upon her that she will receive all the graces necessary for the proper performance of her duty."

When the prioress accused herself to the abbess of the faults of the community, as the rule of St Benedict prescribes, and the sisters all reverently inclined their heads to receive pardon, Gertrude heard our Lord say:

“I also, through the power of My Divinity, absolve you from all the faults of which you have accused yourselves before Me. If, through human frailty, you commit the same again, you will always find Me full of mercy and ready to pardon you once more.”

The seven Penitential Psalms were then recited, but the words appeared to the saint only as pearls of somewhat sombre hue, instead of sparkling jewels. This, she learned, was because they were said out of custom and without special devotion; whence she drew the conclusion that, if actions done through routine help to swell the total of our merits, these same actions done with devotion and fervour of spirit are of much greater value.

At Vespers the same evening an image of the Blessed Virgin was, as usual, carried in procession; and Gertrude was much afflicted because her ill-health during Advent had prevented her from preparing any special offering for our Lady. She was, however, inspired to beg that Mary would accept instead the Heart of her own Divine Son. This precious gift at once flooded the Mother's heart with delight, and she assured Gertrude that she had thus procured for her more joy than all the homage of men could ever afford her.

During the hour of Matins, which, on Christmas Eve, immediately precedes Midnight Mass, Gertrude saw the Mother of God enter the choir and accost the first sister

on the right, presenting her with her Divine Son Whom she carried in her arms, and Whose image she impressed upon her soul. In this manner Mary visited each Sister ; and, as Gertrude watched her going round, she noticed that some held the Infant Jesus in their arms most carefully, while others let His head hang down in a very uncomfortable way. She was told that some had their will so perfectly subject to God that it formed, as it were, a cushion for the Head of the Divine Child, whilst with others it gave no support because it was rigid and imperfect.

“Let us banish then from our hearts,” writes the saint, “all self-will, and let us offer ourselves to God freely and utterly, to accomplish His Will in all things : for in all things He seeks nothing but our spiritual advancement. If we do this, we shall never trouble, even for a single moment, the sweet and tender Child who makes His dwelling in the inmost depths of our souls.”

At the Offertory of the Midnight Mass, Gertrude was permitted to see the Sisters offering to our Lord all the devotions they had practised during Advent. Some placed them in the bosom of the Divine Infant ; and the Blessed Virgin, coming to each one, placed her Child so that He could easily receive their gifts. Others brought their offerings to the middle of the choir and gave them to our Lady, because the Holy Child was

prevented by His extreme tenderness from receiving Himself what they offered. Gertrude understood that the former were those who devoutly worshipped our Lord in the depths of their hearts as though He were spiritually born there ; while the latter contented themselves with thinking of the Divine Infant as Holy Church represents Him to us, born, in time, in a stable at Bethlehem.

Each year, at this holy season, some new favour was granted to Gertrude. Once she received the Infant Jesus from Mary's hands, and was permitted to carry Him in her arms. But as, in doing so, she did not feel her wonted measure of consolation, she attributed it to her negligence in putting away idle thoughts.

Another Christmas, when she felt unusual sweetness, she thought it must be on account of her persevering diligence in devotion to the Sacred Infancy the previous year. Of this occasion we have her own account, written, as usual, in the first person, and addressed to our Lord :

“ When these words of the gospel were read : ‘ And she brought forth her first-born son,’ Thy Immaculate Mother presented Thee to me with her pure hands. And Thou, O most lovely Infant, didst endeavour with all Thy might to embrace me. And I, though utterly unworthy, received Thee ; and Thou didst put Thy little arms around my neck ; breathing upon me with a breath so full of sweetness that I was abundantly

nourished and refreshed. For this, O Lord My God, may my soul and all that is within me adore and bless Thy Holy Name!

“And when Thy Blessed Mother sought to wrap Thee in Thy swathing bands, I begged not to be separated from Thee, but to be wrapped up in them too with Thee, whose smiles and caresses are sweeter than honey as it drops from the honey-comb. Then wast Thou clothed in the fairest robe of innocence, and girt about with the golden girdle of love; and I knew that, if I wished to be so clothed and cinctured, I should strive yet more to acquire interior purity of heart and greater love.”

At the closing feast of Christmastide, Gertrude was often favoured with the visible presence of the Mother of God. Under the date of the Purification is found this paragraph:

“Thanks be to Thee, Creator of the firmament, Who dost trim the lamps of heaven and clothe the flowers of spring, because, though Thou dost not in any way need my goods, Thou hast, nevertheless, asked me, for my own instruction, to clothe Thee with the garments of an infant on the day of Thy Presentation, before Thou art carried into the Temple. This is the manner in which Thou dost desire me to draw these garments from the secret treasure house of Thy love, namely, to extol with all my powers the innocence of Thy holy

Humanity, but with such faithfulness and devotion that if I could receive in my own person all the glory due to Thy spotless purity, I would nevertheless freely renounce it in order to enhance thereby Thy praise. Thereupon, it seemed to me, this offering clothed Thee with a white robe such as infants wear—Thee, Whose mighty power calleth the things that are not as the things that are.

“So also, when I endeavoured, with a like devotion, to penetrate the abyss of Thy lowliness, I saw Thee clothed with a green tunic as a sign that Thy grace ever flourishes and is never wanting in the valley of humility. Then, contemplating the fire of Thy love, which inclines Thee to every creature Thou hast made, I beheld Thee clothed with a brilliant mantle, to indicate that charity is truly a royal vesture, without which none can enter the kingdom of heaven.

“As I admired the same virtues in Thy glorious Mother, she appeared to me clothed in a similar manner. And, since the Blessed Virgin is a rose without thorns and a lily without spot, and abounds, nay, superabounds, with the flowers of all virtues to enrich our poverty, let us beseech this tender Mother to intercede for us continually with Thee.”

Another year, on the same feast, Gertrude rejoiced in spirit at the sound of the bell for Matins, and, though ill in bed, she did her best to follow and take part

spiritually in all that was being done, lovingly saluting our Lord in these words :

“My heart and my soul salute Thee, my sweet Saviour, at the sound of the bell which announces the feast of the Purification of Thy Most Blessed Mother.” To which our Lord replied: “And My tenderness knocks for you at the gate of My mercy, to obtain for you the forgiveness of all your sins.”

As the last sound of the bell died away He added : “O joy of My heart, My Divinity salutes you and I send you all the merits of My Humanity, which will enable you to make a preparation most pleasing to Me for to-day’s feast.”

As the infirmary was distant from the Church, Gertrude was grieved that she could not hear the words of the Office while it was being chanted, words which each year greatly inflamed her devotion. But Jesus consoled her saying: “Beloved, if you cannot follow what is being sung in choir, turn your attention to Me. In contemplating what passes within Me, you will find all you desire.” Then, after receiving other beautiful instructions, the saint was favoured with a vision of all that took place in the Temple on the first feast of the Purification.

Gertrude afterwards saw the Queen of Heaven kneel before God as the Mediatrix between Him and the community, and heard her pray for each Sister individually.

This was while the words "Ora pro populo" were being sung, but her Divine Son at once raised up His Mother respectfully, and, placing her near Him on His own Throne, granted her full authority to command what she would. Mary immediately desired the angelic choir of Powers to surround the community and defend them mightily against the wiles of the ancient enemy of souls. The heavenly spirits quickly obeyed the order of their Queen and joining their shields together encompassed the Sisters on all sides.

But Gertrude also wanted a share in this security, and said to the Blessed Virgin: "O Mother of Mercy, will those who have not assisted in choir have no part in this defence?"

"This defence," replied our Lady, "protects not only those who are in choir, but also the others, wheresoever they may be, who desire to preserve and advance religious observance. As for those who neither practise it themselves nor promote it in others, they shall have no share in the protection of the angels."

To this our Lord Himself added the following instruction: "Let those who wish for this protection apply themselves to learn a lesson from the angels' shields. These are narrow below and broad above: so must souls keep themselves little by the exercise of humility, but at the same time rise to great things by generous trust in My mercy and goodness."

While the Candlemas procession was entering the church, and the words, "Ora pro nobis, Sancta Dei Genitrix" were being sung, Gertrude saw Mary place her Divine Son on the high altar, and then prostrate herself before Him, begging graces for the whole community. In answer the Holy Child bent towards His Mother to show that He would not only grant her request but would accomplish further all that she might ask of Him.

Thus was the saint taught to honour Christ's Blessed Mother in connection with all the mysteries of His Sacred Humanity; and the worship of Jesus and Mary runs like a cord of twisted gold and silver throughout her entire life. Yet, if left to herself, Gertrude like others, found prayer and meditation a labour; and it certainly caused her great physical fatigue.

Of this her biographer gives an instance. One night, as she kept vigil, and was meditating with great affection but with great labour on the Passion of our Lord, she found herself at last quite exhausted. Her custom was to recite, out of devotion and in addition to the Divine Office which was of obligation, the Little Office of our Lady. Feeling quite unequal to this self-imposed task she cried out: "O Lord, since Thou knowest that the weakness of my health makes a little rest absolutely necessary for me, teach me how I can offer Thy Blessed

Mother some honour or homage, for I am quite unable to recite her Office."

Then our Lord taught her a manner of praising Him for the virtues which His Immaculate Mother practised in union with His sufferings. As the saint made use of this devotion she saw our Lord present His Divine Heart to His Mother under the form of a golden cup. Our Lady drank from this, receiving thereby more joy and delight than Gertrude could have afforded her, unaided, by the recitation of her Office.

Another time, the saint offered herself to God during her prayer, and enquired how He wished her to occupy her mind at that time. The reply was: "Honour My Mother who is seated by My side, and apply yourself to praising her." At once Gertrude saluted our Lady, honouring her as the "garden enclosed" which the inscrutable wisdom of God had chosen as His dwelling, and begging that her own heart might be filled with so many virtues that God would take pleasure in dwelling therein also. At this our Lady stooped down and planted in the heart of the saint various flowers of virtue: the rose of charity, the lily of purity, the violet of humility, the sunflower of obedience, and many others, showing thereby how promptly she assists those who invoke her.

Then Gertrude begged our Lady to help her so to regulate her thoughts, words and actions, that she might

imitate her in not giving our Lord the least occasion of pain. Mary sent all her own affections to her under the form of beautiful young maidens whom she had instructed to supply for all the defects of her client. Much consoled, Gertrude turned to our Lord asking Him to make good her omissions in devotion to His Blessed Mother, and this He was pleased to do.

On the following day, Mary again appeared to the saint, in the presence of the Blessed Trinity, under the form of a lily of dazzling whiteness, one petal of which was upright while the other two were bent down in the form of a fleur-de-lys. This flower symbolised the manner in which the power given to the Mother of God reflects the attributes of each of the Three Divine Persons. Gertrude was told that if anyone salutes Mary as the spotless lily of the Blessed Trinity, or the brilliant rose of heaven, she will show in return how she prevails by the Omnipotence of the Father ; how, by the Wisdom of the Son, she is most skilful in procuring the salvation of men, and with how great love her heart is filled by the Charity of the Holy Ghost.

The Blessed Virgin also made this promise: "To those who salute me thus, I will appear in such glory at the hour of death that they will anticipate the very joys of heaven." From this time, therefore, Gertrude frequently saluted our Lady, as she passed her images, with these words: "Hail, pure Lily of the peaceful and

ever glorious Trinity! Hail, effulgent Rose, the delight of heaven! of whom the King of Heaven was born, and by whom He was nourished. Do thou feed our souls by obtaining for them a plentiful effusion of heavenly grace."

Nevertheless, whenever this ardent lover of Jesus heard or read anything in praise of the Blessed Virgin or the saints which moved her more than usual, she was wont to raise her heart to God and offer the pleasure it caused her to the King of kings, so that she thought more of Him than of His Mother, or of the saint whose feast it was.

One feast of the Annunciation, the preacher spoke several times of the Blessed Virgin without referring explicitly to the great mystery of the Incarnation. Gertrude was so grieved at this that, on coming out from church she did not salute our Lady's image with her usual devotion, but tried only to honour her Divine Son.

Soon, however, she began to fear lest she had by this displeased the august Queen of heaven; but our Lord consoled her by saying: "Fear not, Gertrude My beloved; for, although you have referred the honour and praise you usually render to My dear Mother exclusively to Me, it will not be less agreeable to her. But, as your conscience is not quite at rest concerning this matter, take care for the future to salute with

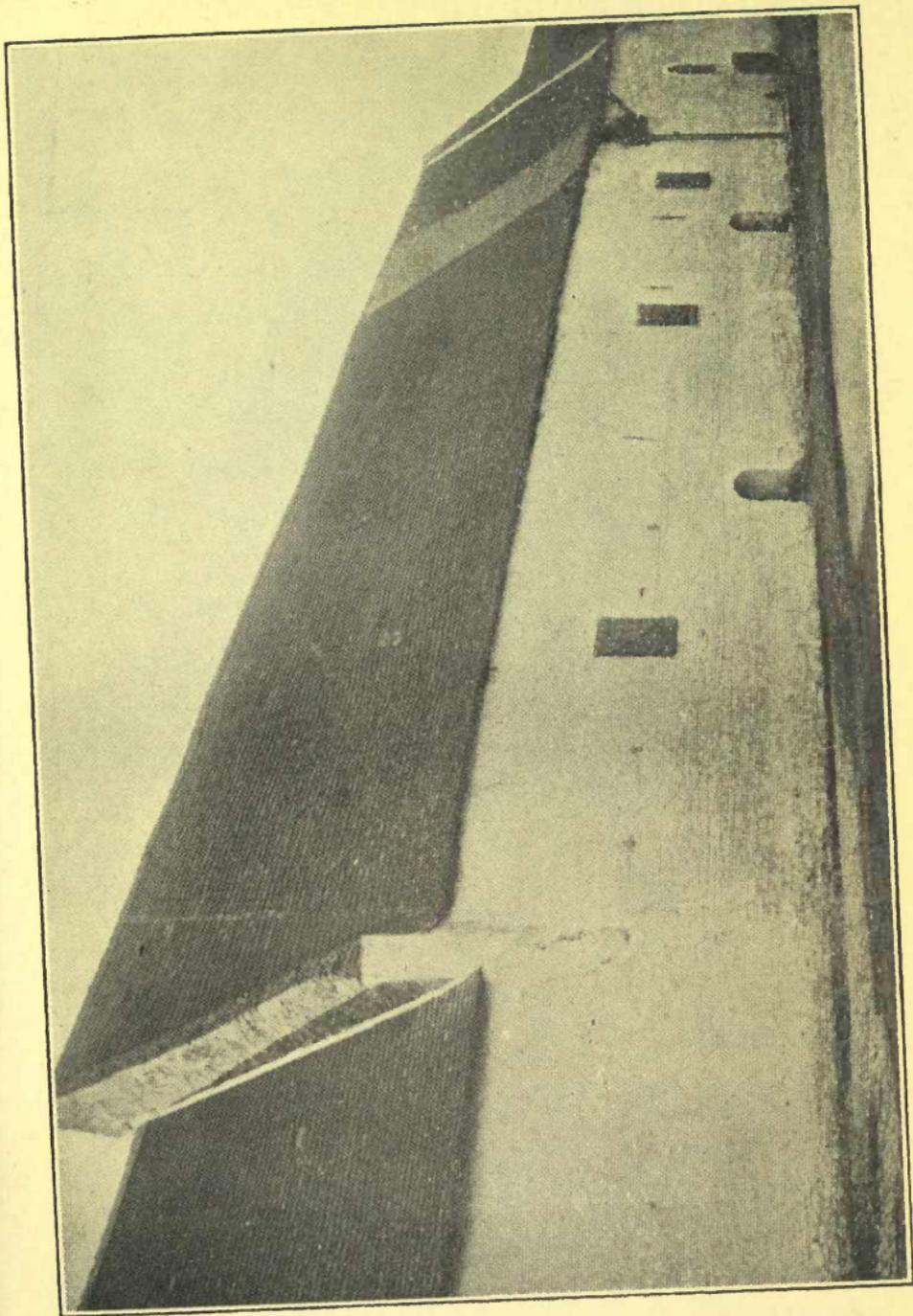
greater devotion the image of My Immaculate Mother when you pass before her altar, and leave My image without a salute."

Gertrude, however, would not hear of this: "I will do nothing of the kind, O my Lord," she answered, "Thou art my only, or rather, my whole good! Never will my heart consent to such a thing. That I should abandon Thee, who art the life and salvation of my soul, to give my affection and reverence elsewhere! Never!"

But our Lord, with infinite gentleness, insisted: "Beloved, do what I am asking of you to-day. Each time you salute My Mother rather than Me, I will accept your act and reward it as one of the highest perfection, for by it I shall perceive that in your fidelity you have not hesitated to leave Me, from whom all good proceedeth, in order to exalt Me the more."

It must by no means be thought from this incident that the true Catholic love of our Lady was wanting in Gertrude. This was so far from being the case that she received from our Lord a testimony to the contrary, which, moreover, is specially mentioned in the Benedictine Office for her feast.

One day, when she was weighed down by the thought of some great trial which, she knew, awaited her, Jesus appeared and gave her as a special protectress His own Blessed Mother. Nor was this privilege granted only



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for this one occasion ; but so that she might always find in this Mother of Mercy an assured refuge, and by her intervention obtain relief when she was more than usually tried.

After this, Gertrude often consulted our Lady in her difficulties. One day, being asked to make known some of her spiritual favours, she felt a great repugnance to betraying "the secret of the King." Hesitating and in doubt as to her proper course, she laid the matter before the Blessed Virgin, who replied : "Give all you have, for my Son is rich enough to repay all you expend for the sake of His glory."

The saint obeyed, but wrapped up what she had to tell with so many precautions that the actual facts were difficult to grasp. Her penetrating sense of justice and obedience was not, however, quite at ease ; so she prostrated herself before our Lord, praying humbly for light to know His will and grace to do it. She heard distinctly His answer : "Give My money into the bank that when I come I may receive it with usury." Thus did Christ confirm His Mother's words, intimating to Gertrude that her reticence was not according to the spirit of God.

Another feature of Gertrude's devotion was the extraordinary fervour with which she prepared for, and celebrated the feasts of the Blessed Virgin. On one feast of our Lady's Nativity, as the first Vespers were

being sung, Gertrude saw the heavens open, and angels descending therefrom, bringing a magnificent throne which they set up in the midst of the nuns' choir. On this the Queen of Angels seated herself in order to receive the prayers and devotions of the religious. The heavenly spirits surrounded the throne and one of them stood by the side of each Sister, holding in his hand a branch on which Gertrude saw flowers and fruit developing according to the devotion of each one.

At the conclusion of the Office, the angels brought the branches to the Blessed Virgin to adorn her throne. At this sight the saint exclaimed: "Alas, kind Mother, I do not deserve to be thus united with the choirs of the Blessed!" Our Lady replied: "Your good will suffices and the devout intention which you had at Vespers of offering your prayers in my honour through the adorable Heart of My Son. This far exceeds any corporal work done in My praise. To assure you of this, I will present your branch of fruit to the ever Blessed Trinity as an offering of the highest merit."

At Matins, Gertrude thanked each Person of the Holy Trinity for having given to us in Mary a creature so full of grace to further our salvation. In return, that glorious Virgin stood before the Godhead praying that the Divine Omnipotence, Wisdom and Goodness would bestow as much grace on Gertrude as it was possible for any creature to receive. Then the Blessed Trinity

poured out upon the soul of the saint abundant graces which refreshed it like a gentle dew.

During Mass, Gertrude saw our Lady pray for the community with clasped hands, while Christ in answer turned towards the nuns and blessed them with the sign of the Cross, thereby preparing them to receive more worthily the adorable Sacrament of His Body and Blood. But in spite of her share in these favours Gertrude was grieved because it seemed to her that she had never served the glorious Queen of Angels as she ought.

At Compline, therefore, as the *Salve Regina* was being chanted, she offered it through the Sacred Heart of Jesus to supply all her deficiencies, and had the consolation of seeing our Lord pour forth upon His Mother, through golden tubes which passed from His Heart to hers, all the tenderness of His filial affection.

At the words *Eia, ergo, Advocata nostra*, the saint saw our Lady bending down towards her, while at those others, *illos tuos misericordes oculos*, Mary lifted her Divine Son so that His face was turned towards the earth, saying as she did so: "These," meaning the eyes of Jesus, "are my merciful eyes which I incline towards all who invoke me devoutly; and from them they obtain the fruit of eternal salvation."

After this, our Lord taught Gertrude to salute His Mother with these words, at least once daily, promising

that, if she did so, Mary would obtain many consolations for her at the hour of death. Gertrude then offered our Lady a psalter of *Aves*, beseeching that tender Mother to assist her at the dread moment of her death. Each word she repeated appeared as a piece of gold which our Lord presented to His Mother, who used them afterwards for the help of Gertrude's soul in its passage to eternity.

As her life drew to an end, the saint was once again asking Jesus to atone for her negligences towards His Mother, by receiving her prayers and offering them Himself to Mary. Her request was granted; and, in addition, Jesus offered to His Mother all the affection He had felt for her when He lived on earth in her company.

"I offer thee once more, O My Mother, all these tokens of My love," He said, "as if I presented them anew to thee, for the sake of My spouse Gertrude, in order that thou mayst overlook her negligences in thy regard, and mayst assist her at the hour of her death with all the tenderness of a mother."

Mary willingly accepted this charge, saying: "Grant, my beloved Son, that when I receive Thy chosen spouse, according to Thy Divine good pleasure, she may partake of some of the overflowing delights which I enjoy." Gertrude was overwhelmed with gratitude and thanked our Lord for thus accepting her humblest efforts, begging pardon at the same time for her lukewarmness in the

recitation of the Divine Office. Christ consoled her by the assurance that He knew her desires and supplied for all her faults.

CHAPTER X

THE HEAVENLY COURTS

IN atonement for her own unworthiness Gertrude was wont to have recourse to the intercession of the angels and saints. One day when she was reproaching herself with want of steadfastness in her good purposes and resolutions, and grieving over the occasions when she had failed, she cried out: "O Jesus, my Beloved! to attach myself to Thee is my sole good!" Almost before the words had left her lips she beheld our Lord lean towards her, as He replied: "For Me also, My beloved, it is always sweet to attach Myself to you."

At this, Gertrude saw all the saints in heaven rise and lay their merits before the throne of God, in order that by giving her a share in them, He might render her heart more worthy to be His dwelling. And, on another occasion, when from the fulness of her heart she exclaimed, "Vile creature that I am, I salute Thee, O my Beloved!" our Saviour sweetly replied: "And I,

beloved, return your salute." By this Gertrude understood that our Lord takes pleasure in being thus lovingly addressed, and gives in return a special reward. Thus St John the Evangelist receives special honour in heaven because when on earth he called himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

This great Apostle was spiritually bound to Gertrude by close ties, and between them there are many points of similarity. Moreover, St John was given to Gertrude by our Lord Himself to be her advocate and protector. It was our Lord also who taught her to say daily an "Our Father" to remind St John of the devotion he felt when he first learned that sublime prayer, and to beg him to obtain for her, in life and death, an inviolable attachment to Jesus Christ.

Each year, on St John's feast, Gertrude beheld him in glory, and she was often permitted to hold with him familiar converse. As she was one day earnestly recommending to the Apostle the needs of several persons, he said: "I am like my Divine Master in this, that I love those who love me." After which he led Gertrude to our Lord, placing her at His right and himself at His left. Then, pointing to our Lord, he said: "See here the Saint of saints, Who draws to Himself all that is good in heaven or on earth."

When Gertrude asked why she had been placed on our Lord's right, the Apostle replied: "It is because

I have become one spirit with God, and am able to penetrate where flesh cannot enter. You are not yet fit for such high things because you are still in the flesh. I have, therefore, placed you at the opening of Christ's Divine Heart, that so you may drink in the sweet consolations flowing from it in such abundance as to satisfy all who taste thereof."

It was St. John, too, who taught Gertrude how to associate herself with everything done in the Church in the interests of Jesus, especially with acts of reparation and penance offered at certain seasons. Father Faber* gives the following account of one vision granted to Gertrude in this connection :

"At the time of the Carnival, the Lord Jesus appeared to her, sitting upon the throne of His glory, and St John the Evangelist was sitting at His feet writing. The saint asked him what he was writing, and our Lord answered for him: 'I am having every one of the devotions your congregation offered to Me yesterday, and all those they are going to offer these next two days carefully noted down on this paper. And when I, to whom the Father has committed all judgment, shall faithfully render to everyone after his death, good measure for all his pious works, and shall, moreover, add the measure pressed down of My most salutary Passion and Death, whereby all man's merit is marvel-

* See "All for Jesus" by Fr. Faber, Ch. III.

lously ennobled, I will take them with this paper to My Father, that He also, out of the Omnipotence of His paternal kindness, may superadd to them His measure shaken together and running over in return for reparation made to Me during these days when worldlings harass and persecute Me.

“ ‘ For, as none equal Me in faithfulness, I can by no means omit to recompense My benefactors. . . . A kindness shown to men in time of adversity is more acceptable than in time of prosperity ; so do I the more gratefully accept this fidelity shown towards Me when the world is especially persecuting Me by sins.’

“ The blessed John, sitting writing, seemed sometimes to dip his pen into an inkhorn which he held in his hand, and out of it to write black letters ; and sometimes he dipped it into the wound in the Side of Jesus and out of it wrote red letters. Again, he touched up the red letters partly with black and partly with gold.

“ The saint understood that black indicated good works done out of custom ; red, those done in memory of Christ’s Passion, with a special intention for the necessities of the Church ; while letters partly blackened represented works done for one’s own salvation, and those gilded showed that God’s glory and the salvation of souls were alone kept in view. For, although all good works obtain from God a copious remuneration, those done purely for His glory are of much greater

merit and dignity and confer upon man a much greater augmentation of eternal bliss.

“Gertrude perceived that after every two paragraphs there was a vacant space, and she asked our Lord what it denoted. He replied: ‘As it is your custom to serve Me at this season with devout desires and prayers in memory of My Passion, I cause to be carefully written down, first the thoughts, and then the words, by which you honour Me. The vacant space means that you are not accustomed to offer your works, as you do your thoughts and words, in memory of My Passion.’

“‘And how, O most loving God, can we laudably do this?’ enquired the saint. ‘By keeping all fasts, vigils and other observances in union with My sufferings,’ answered our Lord, ‘and whensoever you restrain yourself from seeing, hearing, speaking and the like, always referring it to Me in union with the love whereby I held captive all My senses during My Passion. With one glance I could have terrified My adversaries; with one word I could have convicted of falsehood all who contradicted Me; yet was I like a sheep led to the slaughter, with my head humbly bowed down and My eyes fixed upon the ground; and before My judge I opened not My mouth in one word of excuse from the false charges made against Me.’”

Many were the visions granted to Gertrude in which the Beloved Disciple played a part. Once on his feast

when the response at Matins was chanted: "This is John who leaned on the Lord's breast at supper," and again at the antiphon at Lauds: "This is the Disciple whom Jesus loved," he appeared surrounded by a new light of glory which distinguished him from the other saints; and for this they offered to God heartfelt praise which caused the Apostle great joy.

Another time, when the words: "Woman, behold thy son," were repeated, Gertrude saw a marvellous light coming from the Heart of God and shining upon St John so that he became the object of the respect and veneration of the saints. Our Lady, too, manifested a special joy in showing him favour whenever she was called his Mother, while the Beloved Disciple in his turn saluted her with the deepest affection and respect.

Nor was St John the only saint with whom Gertrude was familiar. She saw and conversed with many others, besides having frequent visions of angels. Most of these privileges were granted on the feast days of the saints to whom she was particularly devout. Among them she mentions the young virgin-martyr, St Agnes, and St Catherine of Alexandria whose learning and wisdom were attractive to the studious Gertrude.

In a consoling vision of St Margaret, virgin and martyr, much honoured in the Middle Ages, Gertrude was told to rejoice "for, of a surety, after a short time of trial and suffering in this world, you shall be

rewarded for unending ages with an abundance of heavenly refreshment. Know that your pains of body and soul are sent to you by a particular dispensation of God's love so that from day to day, and from hour to hour, you may be sanctified and rendered more worthy of the joys of eternity."

What Gertrude learned in her heavenly visions was designed not only for her own spiritual good but for that of others. Thus we find St John the Baptist teaching her how profitable it is to receive Holy Communion in honour of the saints, and how each one begs from God for those who invoke him the same virtues for which he was remarkable when on earth. St Bernard told her something similar one day when he appeared to her in glory, clothed in a splendour which appeared to pass from him to all those who desired to obtain, through his merits, a love like his own of God and of our Lady.

Among others who appeared to her were Saints Peter and Paul, St Benedict, St Augustine, St Francis of Assisi, St Dominic, St Mary Magdalen; and each taught her some useful lesson for herself or for others. It could, indeed, be said of Gertrude, literally and not as a figure of speech, that her conversation was in heaven.

The angels, too, seemed to vie with the saints in rendering homage to the lowly Benedictine, a privilege

which was granted to her, she tells us, because her will was so entirely subjected to the Will of God. This was made known to her one Christmas Eve, when, after Vespers, she saw the community surrounded by angelic spirits and heard our Lord address her thus: "Now that I, as Emperor, have accepted you as Empress, all the princes of My heavenly court are so devoted to your wishes that, if you ask anything of them, they will at once hasten to do it."

One day as she was meditating on this privilege, she was anxious to make some return for it, and bethought herself of offering for this intention the Communion she was about to make. "In honour of the great princes of Thy court, I offer Thee, O Lord," she said, "Thy marvellous Sacrament as a homage of eternal praise, and to obtain for these blessed spirits an increase of joy, glory, and beatitude." Then our Lord united Gertrude's offering to Himself in an ineffable manner, and poured out upon the angelic spirits such floods of delight that it seemed as if they had never before experienced so great joy.

After this, the heavenly choirs, according to their rank, saluted Gertrude, and bending before her, said: "We well deserve the honour you pay us, for we watch over you with special care and affection." The choir of Angels added: "We guard you night and day with joyful care, and we never let you lose anything which

might fittingly prepare you for your heavenly Spouse."

Gertrude returned special thanks to God for the care the angels had for her; but at the same time she desired very much to be able to single out among those blessed spirits the one who was specially appointed to be her guardian. God granted her wish, for, almost at the same moment, she saw a glorious prince of the heavenly host standing between our Lord and her own soul. He seemed to lay one hand upon each with gentle respect as he thus addressed her: "With the holy liberty of long familiarity it is often permitted me to bring together the soul and God. Hence it is that I venture to approach at this moment."

Gertrude marvelled at the wonderful reverence of her Angel Guardian, who held back, as it were, from interrupting her converse with God. In return she offered him the little prayers she recited in his honour. These he received with joy, carrying them at once, under the form of roses, to the Blessed Trinity.

After this, all the choirs of the angelic host did reverence to her as Christ's spouse, each saluting her in turn according to their office and capacity. The Archangels addressed her first, saying: "We will discover to you those secrets of the Divine Mysteries which we see in God to be most useful to you, and we will make you familiar with them as far as human understanding will allow."

The Virtues, in their turn, said : “ We will serve you devotedly in all that you do for the glory and praise of God. We will assist you therein and excite you to do still more for the same intention.”

The Dominations promised to supply what was wanting in Gertrude’s love for God so that His Sovereign Majesty might not be robbed of any of the homage due to it.

The Principalities pledged themselves to present her to the King of Glory, clothed in the virtues most pleasing to His Divine Heart ; while the Powers thus addressed her : “ We know how close a union exists between you and your Beloved ; therefore will we unceasingly exert ourselves to remove whatever hinders His communications with you—communications which rejoice the court of heaven and obtain blessings innumerable for the Church on earth. For the prayers of a soul who truly loves God are more powerful with Him for the needs of the living and the dead than those of a thousand others who love less.”

When the heavenly spirits had ceased speaking, Gertrude gave thanks to them and to God “ for these favours and for many others which could be related,” as her biographer assures us, “ if the weakness of human understanding were not an obstacle.” Let the rest be left as the secret of God’s goodness, since the greatest things that He did for the saint are known only to herself and to Him.

CHAPTER XI

THE GREAT FEASTS OF THE YEAR

TRUE to the teaching of Holy Church, who bids her children prepare their hearts and minds for celebrating the commemoration of the great acts of Christ for our redemption and sanctification, Gertrude looked forward to the different liturgical feasts with longing and joy, meditating lovingly upon them beforehand, and feeding her soul with the words and aspirations of the Divine Office appointed to be read at such times.

Once, on the night of Holy Saturday, that night on which Christ rose triumphant from the tomb, the saint was praying devoutly before Matins when Jesus appeared to her, radiant with the beauty and joy of His immortality. Like the holy women of old, Gertrude fell prostrate at His feet in a transport of gratitude and adoration, pouring out her whole heart before Him: "O glorious Spouse of my soul," she cried, "the beauty and the splendour of the angels! Since Thou hast deigned to

choose me, the least of Thy creatures, for Thy spouse, and I have no desire but for Thy honour, my only friends being those who love Thee, I ask Thee now, in memory of Thy Resurrection, to release the souls who are most specially dear to Thee. To obtain this grace more quickly, I offer Thee in union with Thy Passion, all that my heart and my body suffer in my continual infirmities."

Then our Lord showed her a multitude of souls set free by her prayers, while He answered: "I give all these to you in reward for your act of love, and through all eternity it shall be known that they have been delivered by your prayers, so that you shall be honoured in return by all my saints."

To obtain complete beatitude for these souls, Gertrude offered herself anew to bear whatever sufferings it might please God to send her. As if in answer to her prayer, she was attacked by an acute pain in her side; and kneeling down before her crucifix, she begged our Lord to accept it to increase the joy of the souls just released from purgatory. Not only did He take her offering, but He presented it Himself to the waiting souls, saying: "Receive this homage of devotion proffered to Me by My spouse with so much affection, to fill up the measure of your happiness. Do you return her honour for honour, and help her by your prayers."

Being yet further urged by Divine love, Gertrude again

offered herself unreservedly to our Blessed Lord. "O my only Love," she said, "see how in my utter unworthiness I come before Thee, Lord of lords and King of kings, offering Thee my whole being, body and soul, to serve Thee as long as I live, in honour of Thy most glorious Resurrection." Jesus once more accepted her offering, telling her that He would make of it a sceptre which should glorify Him for ever before the Blessed Trinity and all the saints, as a present from His chosen spouse.

After this, our Lord taught her how to chant the Easter Alleluias so as to give Him the greatest glory, pouring spiritual delights upon her as she recited each psalm and lesson.

As Ascension Thursday drew near, Gertrude honoured in a special way the five sacred Wounds, the marks of which our Lord retained even after He was risen. In return for this devotion Jesus appeared to her one day radiant with glory and bearing on each wound a golden flower. He promised to come to her with the same radiance at the hour of her death, and to cover her faults in the same way as she by her prayers had covered His wounds.

On the Sunday immediately preceding the feast, the saint, on rising, hurried to the choir to recite the psalms for Matins, hoping thereby to gain a little time for meditation, during which she was wont to give free scope

to her devotion and pour out all her love for her dear Master. She had already finished the fifth Lesson when she caught sight of an invalid sister who required someone to read her Office for her. Filled with charity as Gertrude was, she could not leave this task undone, so she said to our Lord: "See, dear Master, how I have already all but exhausted my feeble strength by reciting Matins by myself. But I want to lodge Thee within my heart, O God of love, and last week I made but a poor preparation for Thy coming. To-day I will make reparation for my negligence by beginning Matins over again for love of Thee."

As she seated herself beside the sufferer and took up the words of the Divine Office, Jesus came to her and poured out upon her untold sweetness, because in serving her sister she was really serving Him. This, indeed, is one of the conditions laid down by Himself for admission to His heavenly kingdom: "I was sick and you visited Me."

When the Office was finished, Gertrude's little stock of strength was exhausted and she was forced to rest for awhile. Our Lord remained with her and made her rest her head upon His Sacred Heart, until she was able to return to the church in order to assist at the Holy Sacrifice. There she told our Lord all the needs of her soul, begging Him by His triumphant Ascension to make satisfaction for all her defects and negligences.

“You are that amiable Esther,” He replied, “whose marvellous beauty is most pleasing in My sight. Ask whatever you will and it shall be given to you.” The saint prayed earnestly for all who had recommended themselves to her prayers, but especially for those who had rendered her any service, however small. As she was thus occupied, she learnt from our Lord that she had accepted some benefit on the preceding day with too much human satisfaction. Recognising her infidelity in thus resting in the love of creatures instead of referring it at once to God, Gertrude exclaimed: “Alas, dear Lord, why dost Thou allow others to notice me, and, in a way, even to revere me, when Thou, Lord and Master of all as Thou art, didst appear on earth as the least of men and still dost find Thy glory in letting Thy saints be contemned and despised by the world?”

Our Saviour corrected this mistaken view and said that He allowed others to think well of her and serve her so that they might thereby sanctify themselves and be disposed to receive His grace. But Gertrude’s anxiety was not so easily dispelled. “What will become of me, then,” she asked, “if Thou dost sanctify others by my faults?” Jesus replied: “I take pleasure in giving you divers ornaments, some dusky, some shining,” by which the saint understood the difference between the reward of actions mixed with human motives and that of such as are done purely for God.

At dawn on Ascension Day, Gertrude was planning what she would do at mid-day, the hour at which our Lord is supposed to have entered heaven, when He appeared to her, saying: "Give Me now all the homage you are preparing for Me, for all the joy I then experienced will be renewed in Me when I enter your heart in the adorable Sacrament of the altar." Gertrude asked Him to teach her how to arrange a procession like the one He made with His disciples when "He led them out as far as Bethania." To this our Lord replied: "Bethany means 'the house of obedience.' You cannot, therefore, arrange a better procession or one more pleasing to Me than to lead Me into your heart, offering Me your will without any reserve, and deploring the many occasions on which you have followed your own wishes rather than Mine."

At the moment when she received Holy Communion our Lord said to her: "Behold, I come to you not to bid you farewell, but to take you with Me and present you to God, My Father." At None He appeared to her again, clad in a tunic of green and crimson. Then Gertrude saw Him, accompanied by a multitude of angels, pass along the monastic choir, saluting each religious who had communicated that morning, with the words: "I am with you always, even to the end of the world."

To some He also gave a ring in which was set a magnificent jewel, saying as He did so: "I will not

leave you orphans: I will come to you." Gertrude asked our Lord why some received this mark of special affection, to which He replied: "These, while they sat at table, recalled the last refectio*n* I took with My disciples before My Ascension, and said the prayer, 'O most loving Jesus, may the virtue of Thy Divine love incorporate me wholly with Thee.' Therefore have I given them a special reward."

As the antiphon "He lifted up His hands and blessed them" was being sung, the saint saw her Divine Master, still surrounded by angels, rise into the air, whence He blessed the whole community with the sign of the Cross, adding the words He spoke to His Apostles: "My peace I leave with you; My peace I give unto you." From this Gertrude knew that, come what might, nothing could take from the hearts of His faithful servants that most blessed peace of God which makes His yoke sweet and His burden light.

In her preparation for the feast of Pentecost, Gertrude was accustomed to ask earnestly for the four virtues of purity of heart, humility, tranquillity, and concord; the two last as a rampart against her own natural impetuosity. In answer to her prayer she saw our Lord surround her heart with a circlet of gold to secure her peace of soul, and give her as it were, a veil to cover and preserve all the virtues in her soul, especially the gifts and fruits of the Holy Ghost.

On the eve of the feast, she begged our Saviour to prepare her for the coming of the Holy Spirit on the morrow; and she heard Him answer with infinite tenderness: "You shall receive the power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you." Later on, while the baptismal font was being blessed in the parish church, He cleansed her soul from all its stains; and as Gertrude recommended herself to the care of the saints, they all offered their merits to God to make good her negligences and supply her needs.

On Whit Sunday morning, in spite of great weakness which obliged her to interrupt the recitation of Matins, Gertrude received Holy Communion, and offered the life of Christ to God the Father in reparation for the poverty of the abode her soul had presented to the Holy Spirit, since He had come to dwell therein on the day of her baptism. As she did so she saw the Holy Ghost descend under the form of a dove upon the adorable Sacrament of the altar and find a pleasing refuge in the Sacred Heart of our Lord. At Tierce she was instructed in a mystical interpretation of the *Veni Creator*; and Jesus appeared visibly before her, flooding her soul with consolation, so that she knew His promise had been fulfilled and that the power of the Holy Ghost had indeed come upon her by the strengthening of His gifts within her soul.

Even when Pentecost was over, the saint was still

aflame with love and fervour. She reproached herself for showing so little gratitude to our Lord for the intimacy with which He treated her in preference to so many others, and for taking so little care to attach herself to Him in return by renouncing all exterior occupations and satisfactions. She asked Him to allow her in future to suffer the punishment due to her neglect that so she might atone for it. On Wednesday in Whitsun week she offered the Sacred Host she was about to receive for the same intention. At the moment when the Blessed Sacrament was placed upon her tongue, our Lord made known to her that her offering was accepted and the Holy Spirit, entering with the Host into her soul, united Himself closely and inseparably to her.

On the following Sunday, when the Church keeps the feast of the ever-blessed Trinity—a feast too great to be celebrated by outward pomp and ceremonial—Gertrude saw our Lord offer His Divine Heart as a sweet-toned lyre to sound the praises of the Triune God. While the Office of the day was chanted on earth, this lyre caught up and echoed each psalm and prayer before the throne of God, sweetly and distinctly, or vaguely and uncertainly, according as the Office was recited with more or less devotion.

All through the day Gertrude did her best to keep up her devotion, but she was not favoured with as many

supernatural lights as usual. While she wondered at this, our Lord explained that, according to strict justice, she had deserved to be deprived of spiritual illumination because she had followed only her own inclinations in chanting the Office and had taken a purely human delight in it. Nevertheless, she would gain some merit by her devotion as she had certainly put the praise of God before her own convenience.

Gertrude kept the feasts of our Lady with very special devotion and did not fail to obtain many graces in return. Perhaps of all the feasts of Mary that of her glorious Assumption was the saint's favourite. Each year she was allowed to spend the day almost entirely in our Lady's company, receiving from her many marvellous favours. One year, feeling that she had never sufficiently honoured Christ's Blessed Mother, she asked Him to intercede for her. In answer to her Divine Son's request Mary gave herself entirely to Gertrude and showed her how she protected under the mantle of her maternal love all who had recourse on her.

That day the saint saw our Lord presiding at chapter as He was wont to do at Christmas, and as she looked in surprise He said to her: "To-day, in honour of My beloved Mother, I will receive with special affection all who desire to celebrate her feast devoutly." During Vespers Gertrude offered the words of the psalms to the Sacred Heart in memory of all the loving intercourse

which had taken place between Himself and His beloved Mother while He was on earth. This act of devotion passed from the Heart of Jesus to that of Mary, there breaking into a shower of brilliant stars which surrounded the Blessed Virgin, seeming to afford her consolation and delight. Then the Holy Ghost gently touched, as it were, the lute of the Sacred Heart in order to praise and glorify the Maiden-Mother of Christ.

Another year, when Gertrude was too ill to go and chant the Office of the Assumption in choir she was rapt into an ecstasy in which she saw our Lady honoured by the Blessed Trinity and the whole court of heaven. On coming to herself she found her illness abated and was able to go to Mass with the other religious, even walking on before them without any assistance. This supernatural vigour lasted till the end of the Holy Sacrifice.

On the same feast in another year while the saint was assisting at Mass and preparing to receive Holy Communion, she called upon all the saints, as was her custom, to offer their merits to our Lord to prepare her for this great Sacrament. The Blessed Virgin, on being asked this favour, rose from her throne in heaven and beckoned Gertrude to come and seat herself thereon. "Come, O beloved," she said, "and take my place, with all the perfection of virtue which drew upon me the

complacency of the ever Blessed Trinity, so that, as far as is possible, you may receive the same favour."

But Gertrude drew back abashed. "O Queen of glory," she exclaimed, "what can I do to merit so great a favour?" Our Lady explained to her how she might use her merits—especially her purity, her humility and her love—and offer them to God to obtain the privilege she desired. Then, clothed in Mary's merits, Gertrude stood before our Lord, Who took ineffable delight in her soul, while all the angels and saints came to do her homage. Thus prepared, Gertrude received Holy Communion, which she offered to our Lord for the increase of the joy and glory of His Blessed Mother and in thanksgiving for the manner in which Mary had come to her aid. Jesus, turning to His Mother, said: "Behold, O My Mother, I return what you gave, doubled; nor will I take from her anything of what you desired to bestow upon her for My sake."

Other things, many and wonderful, were shown to the saint on this same day; until, finally, she saw our Lady conducted up to the highest heaven by her Divine Son, while a thrill of joy and triumph ran through the angelic hosts and the different orders of saints. From this position Mary blessed the community of Helfta with her Son's right hand; and, as a pledge of this benediction, Gertrude saw a golden cross appear over the head of each religious.

Similar favours were granted to her on other great feasts. One year as, according to her wont, she was honouring the holy Name of Jesus on the feast of the Circumcision, she saw her loving aspirations suspended before our Lord under the form of white roses shining like stars. From the centre of each flower hung a little golden bell which gave forth a sweet note each time Gertrude pronounced the Holy Name, thereby causing ineffable delight to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Encouraged by the sight, she exerted herself still more to find words to express her devotion. Then Jesus, the Crown of Virgins, vanquished by her love, stooped down to her saying: "See how I come to print upon your lips My Holy Name, for I wish you to carry it before the whole world. Each time that you move your lips to utter it, the sound will be to Me a most delicious melody."

After this the saint bore the name of Jesus imprinted on her heart, and as all her thoughts were of Jesus, and all her actions were directed towards Him, she, unconsciously, drew others to live for Him also. The sweet influence of familiar intercourse with Jesus passed from Gertrude to all who came into contact with her, and still acts upon all who come to know and love her. Thus is this cloistered saint in some sort an apostle, teaching us by her silence, as well as by her words, how to spend our lives for Jesus, making Him the King and

Centre of our hearts, and so helping to satisfy the longing of His own Heart that we should look upon Him as a most dear Friend. "I have called you friends," He said to His Apostles at the Last Supper; and again, "As the Father hath loved Me I also love you: Abide in My love."

CHAPTER XII

THE SOULS IN PURGATORY

OF all Catholic devotions, the dearest, perhaps, to the Heart of Christ, is devotion to the Holy Souls. "It is," says Father Faber, "as if all the threads of God's glory were gathered up into it and fastened there, and that when one is touched all vibrate and make melody to God, part of that sweet song which the sacred human Heart of Jesus is singing ever in the bosom of the most compassionate Trinity." *

Gertrude knew and felt this, and many were the practices of penance and devotion she made use of to obtain the release of the suffering souls. She even deprived herself on their behalf of all the satisfactory part of her good works. This sacrifice forms the matter of the well-known *Heroic Act* and it is interesting to note the saint's view of the completeness and reality of the offering.

* "All for Jesus": Chap. IX. Fr. Faber,

As she was praying one day for the soul of a deceased Sister and renewing her intention of making over to her all the good she did, Gertrude was suddenly overcome by the thought of her own needs, and turning to our Lord, she said: "I hope, O Lord, that Thou wilt often look in mercy upon Thy servant, thus despoiled of her merits and reduced to absolute poverty."

Jesus replied: "What can I do for her who has thus deprived herself of all her wealth through charity, but cover her with the mantle of My love, and work with her more diligently so that she may regain what love has prompted her to give away?" But Gertrude objected: "In vain wilt Thou work with me, dear Lord. I must necessarily come to Thee stripped of all merit, for I have given away all I have acquired or may yet acquire."

"Do you not think," continued our Lord, "that a mother would let her children sit at her feet if they were warmly clad, but would take a shivering babe into her arms and warm it against her bosom? Will you, then, be worse off when seated beside the ocean of all good than those who sit by a little rivulet?"

Gertrude was comforted, knowing well that by those who sat beside a rivulet Christ meant souls who keep their good works for themselves; and that, in return for her charity in renouncing all for the sake of those suffering in Purgatory, He would supply what was

wanting to her after death from the ocean of His mercy.

During her whole life Gertrude enjoyed the privilege of seeing the Holy Souls and discoursing with them. Their approach caused her no alarm, for "perfect love casteth out fear," and she talked to them and questioned them as if they had been living members of her community. It was one of the means our Lord made use of for instructing her on many points concerning the perfection He demands, not only from religious, but from all Christians.

With regard to her Sisters in religion, the supernatural knowledge granted to Gertrude not infrequently began during their last agony. She saw her beloved abbess, Gertrude Hackeborn, after death, and the same privilege was accorded to her in the case of St Mechtilde. Sometimes she learnt from our Lord the faults which the dying person had committed, so that atonement being made for them beforehand, the soul might go straight to heaven.

For instance, Gertrude prayed for a long time for a Sister whose initials are given as M.B., whose fault, made known supernaturally, was a too great attachment to exterior things, such as an ornamental quilt for her bed, gilded pictures and other things of like nature. On the morning of this Sister's death, as Gertrude was trying during Mass to make reparation for this fault, she

felt the soul near her though she could not see it. Fearing that it was detained in purgatory, she enquired of our Lord, Who replied that it was with Him. This caused Gertrude great joy, for she knew that what she had offered before the Sister's death had been accepted, and that she had been allowed to go straight to God.

The saint's biographer gives an account of two other deaths at Helfta. "We had with us at the same time two invalids. One, it was soon evident, was attacked by consumption, and she received, as was fitting, every care and attention. The disease of the other did not declare itself exteriorly and she was not nursed with the same diligence. It happened that the latter died a month before the former, sanctified by her patience and devotion, but not completely purified. She was allowed, however, before her death to expiate her faults, and especially her lack of zeal for the Sacrament of Penance. It appears that, as she had only venial faults to confess, she did not exert herself, but pretended to be asleep when the confessor came, that she might not be disturbed. When the end came she asked anxiously for him, but before he could be brought she lost the use of speech.

"The fear and dread this caused her sufficed to cleanse her soul from the faults she had thus wilfully left unconfessed, and Gertrude saw her immediately after her death, radiant with glory and standing before

the throne of God. Moreover, our Lord was gently consoling her for the pain she had felt when she had been a little neglected on account of the other invalid whose state seemed more serious.

“Then Jesus turned to Gertrude and said: ‘Tell Me, My daughter, what would you like Me to do for the soul of your companion, and how you would wish Me to console her. On earth she could choose what food she liked and you had to be content with her choice; now it is for you to choose what gifts I shall bestow upon her!’ ‘Ah! my dearest Lord,’ exclaimed the saint, ‘do Thou give her the same gifts Thou hast given to me, for I cannot think of any more consoling.’

“A month later the second invalid died, and the morning after her death Gertrude saw her clothed in dazzling white, as a reward for her innocent life and her zeal for the austerities of her order. Nevertheless, for having during her illness accepted several things which were not really necessary, and for having taken too much satisfaction in the gifts and sympathy of her friends, she was purified by having to stand at the gate of heaven, facing the throne of God. Gertrude saw her trying to enter but unable to move because her garments were all attached to the ground with strong nails.

“Touched with compassion at the sight, the saint begged our Lord to set the soul free, for it was fainting with desire of possessing Him. Her request was

granted, and Gertrude, in surprise at the speedy answer, asked the reason. 'Dear Lord,' she said, 'this soul has many friends who love her very much. I know they have prayed for her; and now, when at my prayer Thou hast set her free, they will think it is their supplications Thou hast answered.'

"Our Lord replied: 'I have really heard the prayers of her friends and I have answered them favourably, inasmuch as I have done more for this soul than they could understand, even had they seen her by their prayers transferred from purgatory to heaven. Nevertheless, I did not make known to them the hindrance from which I delivered her through your prayers, nor, indeed, did they pray for her in the same way as you.'

"But, since our Lord had revealed to her that the reward of these two souls should be equal, Gertrude did not yet feel satisfied. Therefore she reminded Him of His promise, saying: 'How hast Thou fulfilled Thy intention of treating this soul with the same goodness as the other, for she lived longer in religion and yet has not passed straight to Thee like the one who died first?'

"And Jesus, that His ways might through his handmaid be better understood, deigned to explain this to her. 'My justice is always the same,' He said, 'and rewards each soul according to its works. It can never happen that one who has merited less can receive a

greater reward than another whose merit is greater, but there are certain circumstances, such as a purer intention, greater personal effort in doing good, or a more ardent love, which enhance the value of what is done. Moreover, to the reward due for good works thus accomplished, My goodness sometimes, gratuitously, adds something over and above, either on account of the prayers of My faithful servants or for some meritorious act. This is the rule I have followed in regard to these two souls, since I have given them an equal reward and have yet apportioned it according to the merit of each.'

"But though Gertrude's prayers had loosened the nails which kept this soul from entering heaven, it was not yet entirely purified, and the saint had another vision of the Sister trying in vain to reach our Lord. Again Gertrude prayed earnestly for her relief, and after some time she had the consolation of seeing her Sister crowned by our Blessed Lord and fully enjoying the bliss of heaven.

"Nevertheless, the saint, who had from the beginning seen the Sister at the gate of heaven, was puzzled that a soul already so near the enjoyment of God's presence could be tormented by such fruitless striving. 'Is it possible, dear Lord,' she cried, 'that on the very threshold of Thy Kingdom a soul can be thus tormented?' 'She is not tormented,' answered our Saviour, 'she only

awaits with joy the accomplishment of all her desires; even as a maiden would joyfully await the morning of a festival on which she was to be adorned with the ornaments her mother had prepared for her.'

"After this the soul turned smilingly to her benefactress and thanked her for the prayers she had said. With all the familiarity of a sister, Gertrude spoke to her, saying: 'We used to be friends, and yet during your illness you did not seem to be pleased when I gave you some good advice.' But the complaint, if it was one, was forgotten in the loving reply: 'Your prayers have only been the more useful to me because they were offered purely out of charity and for God's sake.'"

A Sister who died young, after severe sufferings endured for the souls in purgatory whose deliverance was most desired by our Lord, was seen by Gertrude in heaven close to the Sacred Heart. She told the saint that all the treasures of the Divinity were open to her except one particular corner. This was closed to all but those who joyfully communicated to others the gifts they had received from God; and she, when on earth, had not had this perfection of charity. Nevertheless, she was rewarded for every thought, word and action which she had performed for the sake of her Divine Spouse.

Many revelations were also granted to Gertrude

concerning the lay-brothers who formed part of the monastic household. On one occasion it happened that she was very busy while one of the brothers was in his last agony, and she did not think of praying for him until she was told of his death. Grieved beyond measure at her neglect, the saint besought our Lord to hasten the reward of one who had so faithfully served the community. For her consolation it was made known to her that the brother was already receiving a triple recompense: the renewal in his soul of the joy he used to experience in serving others; the joy of knowing that he had been useful, and the joy that others had in being served so willingly—the poor whom he had helped by an alms; the children to whom he had made little presents; or the sick whom he had refreshed with fruit or some other delicacy; and, over and above all, the still greater joy of knowing that all these actions had been pleasing in God's sight.

Another time, when praying for the repose of the soul of a certain Brother Hermann, Gertrude enquired of our Lord where he was. "He is here," our Saviour answered. "In return for the prayers offered for him, we have called him to take part in our banquet." At the same moment the saint saw our Lord seated at the head of a table on which were placed all the prayers and good works which had been performed for Brother Hermann's release from purgatory. The brother him-

self was also there, but he sat at the other end of the table, sad and dejected, for his soul was not yet sufficiently purified to be worthy of gazing unhindered on the beauty of God.

Nor did he receive from our Lord what was done for him as Gertrude had often seen others do; but whatever solace he derived from these good works came straight from the acts themselves. However, in answer to the earnest prayers said for him, our Lord Himself now and then added some consolation, as did our Blessed Lady who was also there, and the saints to whom the brother had been particularly devout.

As Gertrude watched all this she saw the face of the suffering brother grow happier hour by hour, and gradually he raised his eyes to gaze upon Him on whom the angels desire to look. Taking courage she questioned Hermann as to the faults for which he suffered most. "For my self-will," he replied, "and for insisting on my own views and opinions. Even when I did what was right, I followed my own ideas and would not take advice from others. So much do I suffer for this that if all the sorrows which oppress the hearts of men could be gathered into one, they would not adequately represent what I am enduring."

Gertrude begged to know how she could best succour him, and he told her that he would receive most relief from those who, in thinking of his punishment, avoided

faults of a like kind. "But, in the meantime," queried the saint, "from what do you receive the greatest consolation?" Hermann answered: "The fidelity which I practised when on earth consoles me most. The prayers of those who remember me refresh me, and each note of the chant at Mass, or in the Office which is said for me, comes to me as a most delicious refecton. All that is done for me by others with the intention of praising God, such as working, eating or sleeping, is accepted for my relief and advances me continually nearer heaven because I always served others faithfully and took pleasure in working for their convenience."

But the brother had yet much to expiate; and another day when Gertrude was saying a Pater Noster for him, she saw him again and noticed that, as she pronounced the words "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us," his sufferings seemed to increase. Wondering at this strange circumstance, she questioned him and understood that it was because he had not readily pardoned those who had offended him. "For a long time," he said, "I would meet them in a cold, resentful manner; and now, in expiation, I suffer intensely and experience intolerable shame whenever I hear these words."

Nor did Hermann's punishment stop there, for, on yet another day at Mass, Gertrude saw him again, this time in joy and glory. But she learned from our Lord

that his purification was not even then complete, though it was always progressing. Yet, lest the saint should attribute this long delay to her own unworthiness, He added: "Your prayers cannot succour this soul as speedily as they would have done, had it not, while on earth, been rigid and inflexible, refusing to bend its will to meet the wishes of others in any matter at all, so long as it did not suit its own inclinations."

Another lesson of the same kind was given to Gertrude on the death of Brother John, procurator to the monastery. He had served the community faithfully during many years; and, as his soul left the body, the saint saw his good works forming a ladder which he had to mount step by step before he could attain eternal bliss. But, since it is almost impossible to avoid slight infidelities, and yet nothing imperfect can enter heaven, the soul expiated its faults by the difficulty with which it climbed the ladder. Hardly had it passed a few rungs when the whole structure trembled violently, and seemed about to break. The prayers of the community came, however, to the brother's assistance, as if a hand had been stretched out to help him to mount. By this Gertrude learned that, when anyone died who had rendered service to the community, the prayers of the Sisters greatly relieved his sufferings in purgatory.

Once, when Gertrude was ill in bed, they came to tell her of the death of a lay-brother and she immedi-

ately began to pray for him. As she did so, she saw his soul, all black and deformed, suffering intensely from remorse of conscience. Moved with pity at this sight, she recited five Paters in honour of the five sacred Wounds of Christ, and kissed them tenderly on her crucifix. As she kissed the wound in our Lord's side, she saw issuing from it blood and water, which, falling upon the brother's soul, greatly refreshed it.

Nevertheless, it still seemed covered with grievous wounds; and, as the community continued to pray, Gertrude saw the brother taken to a garden of herbs, which represented the good works he had performed during his life. These herbs he applied to his wounds and was much relieved. After his burial Gertrude saw him again, this time sharing in the praises offered to God by the community.

Another brother who had, in spite of his character as a religious, neglected to lift his mind above earthly things, appeared to Gertrude after his death under the form of a hideous toad, consumed inwardly by a burning fire and weighed down by a heavy burden. It was revealed to her that the burning was to expiate his negligence in the service of God, and his habit of working for temporal gain without the permission or even the knowledge of his superiors. The weight which pressed upon him so grievously was a punishment for want of submission to those placed over him. Gertrude

offered the accustomed vigils and prayers for this soul, but learned from our Lord that very often the souls in purgatory receive more relief from a short prayer said voluntarily for them than from those appointed by the Rule, which were often said perfunctorily and without devotion.

Once, in the presence of the saint, a certain person received the news of the death of a relative of whose salvation she had great doubts; and her affliction was so deep that Gertrude was moved to pray earnestly for the deceased. Our Lord told her that He had arranged that the news should be given while she was present, for the sake of securing her prayers. As she wondered that this should be necessary, seeing that an inspiration from Him would have sufficed, He explained: "I take particular pleasure in a good work prompted by natural sympathy in the first instance, but directed almost instantly to Me and so transformed into a supernatural act."

God then allowed Gertrude to see the soul as an ugly toad, black as charcoal and writhing in torments. She pleaded earnestly for it, saying: "O my Lord, wilt Thou not, for love of me, have pity on this soul?" Jesus tenderly replied: "For your love I will have pity, not only on this soul, but on a million others. How would you have Me show My mercy? Shall I forgive his sins and cancel all his punishment?"

At this the saint was somewhat abashed and falter-

ingly said: "My Lord, perhaps this would not be consistent with Thy justice." This time, as once before, Gertrude was mistaken in her estimate of how much God loved her. He answered: "It will be quite consistent with My justice if only you ask it with confidence; because, with My perfect knowledge of the future, I predisposed this person, during his last agony for the reception of this grace."

Gertrude at once entered into God's merciful designs, saying: "Then, dearest Lord, my only Saviour, do all according to Thy mercy. I await this favour with the utmost confidence." She had hardly finished these words when the soul appeared once more before her, this time in human form; and, though not yet entirely cleansed from all its former stains, manifesting great joy and gratitude.

The final purification of this soul was effected with difficulty, and took a long time; and Gertrude wondered to see it content under such prolonged suffering. It was, however, revealed to her that some great sinners cannot, on first reaching purgatory, profit by the ordinary suffrages of the Church. After a certain period of expiation this obstacle is removed, and the prayers and good works of the faithful, constantly descending into purgatory like a refreshing dew, can relieve them as well as the rest of the suffering portion of Christ's flock.

The saint enquired what prayers she could say in order to remove from the soul in question this terrible hindrance to its speedy release. Our Lord answered : "No prayer or good work is sufficient of itself to succour a soul doomed to this penalty. It can only be helped by an act of love similar to that you have just made. Now this is itself a favour which cannot be earned, and which only I can give ; nor can it be applied to a soul in purgatory unless that soul has merited it during life through some special grace. Nevertheless, the punishment will at length be mitigated by the prayers and satisfactory acts of the faithful on earth, especially if they are offered with affection. The time of expiation is longer or shorter according to the fervour of the friends of the deceased, and also according to his own merits."

After this the soul helped by Gertrude's prayers begged of God to reward her for her charity ; and our Lord took from its outstretched hands a golden coin as a sign that He granted its request, and put it aside as a recompense for the saint.

One day, as the saint was praying in general for all the souls in purgatory, she saw a soldier, who had died about fourteen years previously. His appearance was that of a hideous monster covered with sharp-pointed horns instead of hairs. He was suspended over the mouth of hell by a sort of pole placed under his left

arm, and from the abyss rose a vapour which caused him indescribable torment; nor could he receive relief from the ordinary suffrages of the Church. God made known to Gertrude that the man, while on earth, had sinned by pride and arrogance, denoted by the horns, but that his occasional acts of good will, denoted by the pole, had saved him from being condemned to the flames of hell.

She began the recitation of the Great Psalter for his relief; and at once the hideous appearance ceased, and the soul took the form of a little child, though still covered with stains. Gertrude redoubled her prayers, and soon the soldier was transported to a place where several other souls were assembled. Arrived there, he manifested as great joy as if he had been taken from the depths of hell to the delights of paradise; and his benefactress knew by this that he was now able to receive help from the ordinary treasury of the Church.

With regard to the help given by the holy souls to those devout to them Gertrude had the following vision. It happened that a sister, who had been accustomed to offer her work for their relief, died. Gertrude saw her arrayed in beautiful garments, but so weighed down by heavy stones that it required the efforts of several persons to conduct her to our Lord. These, the saint understood, were the souls she had delivered by her prayers; while the stones were her acts of disobedience,

for in life she had preferred her own will in fasting and mortification to that of her superiors.

The saint once saw the path by which souls ascend to heaven. It resembled a narrow, rough plank difficult to climb. Some were assisted along it by angels who drove away the devils in the shape of horrible dragons flying round to prevent souls from advancing. For religious there was a kind of hand-rail which signified the help afforded them by living under obedience; and, moreover, the angels came and removed all obstacles from their way.

Seeing all these things, Gertrude turned with tears to our Lord and said: "Alas! my dearest Master, Thou hast hitherto shown me the merits of the saints and their great reward; but now I see nothing except the sufferings endured in purgatory." Jesus answered: "Formerly men were touched by the gifts of My grace, but to-day the thought of My severest punishments hardly withholds them from sin."

This, then, was our Lord's intention in revealing to Gertrude the sufferings which await us in purgatory, if we do not faithfully fulfil our duties on earth. Acts and prayers offered for the Holy Souls, the saint informs us, are most pleasing to our Lord. He receives with delight what we offer for those who can no longer make satisfaction for themselves. Nor shall we thereby be the losers, for He has said: "With what measure you mete it shall be measured to you again."

CHAPTER XIII

THE JOY OF PAIN

BESIDES the constant cross of weariness and frequent petty indispositions due to her naturally delicate constitution, Gertrude had at various times really grave illnesses. But she bore all with invincible patience and sweetness and in such a confiding child-like spirit that the very remedies and dispensations she was forced to make use of, turned into opportunities of merit. Like St Teresa she learnt from our Lord Himself how to take refreshment in union with Him and in order to be able to serve Him more perfectly.

“Whosoever shall study,” He said to her, “to take all his recreation and use his comforts in eating, drinking and sleeping with this intention in his heart and on his lips: ‘Lord, I take this food—or whatever it may be—in union with that love with which Thou didst sanctify Thyself in Thy sacred Humanity by using like things to the glory of Thy Father and for the salvation

of the human race ; and I offer it in union with Thy Divine love for the consolation of the faithful in heaven, on earth and in purgatory,' I will accept his action ; and he shall be to me as a strong shield against the vexations with which worldly people persecute Me, and I will look upon him as My protector and defender."

There was nothing strained or unnatural in Gertrude's piety. Everything around her helped to lift her thoughts to heaven, and she rejoiced in the beauties of nature because they spoke to her of God. One morning during Paschaltide when the earth was clothed with all the beauty of early spring, she went out into the garden between Prime and Holy Mass and seated herself near a fountain from which the sparkling water rose like a spray of diamonds flashing in the sunlight. She tells us herself how charmed she was to see reflected in the limpid water the fresh green of the budding trees on either side of the stream which fed the fountain, and to hear the clear notes of the birds as they flew in and out of the branches, and the cooing of the turtle-doves in the soft morning air.

"Considering in myself," she writes, "what was wanting to complete the charm of this retreat, I found that I needed a friend, wise, intimate and loving, who should share with me my pleasure and console me in my loneliness. Then Thou, my Lord and God, Who art a torrent of inestimable delight, and Who hadst

arranged for me this pleasant beginning of my meditation that Thou mightest win me to Thyself, Thou didst show me what I ought to do. If, by continual gratitude, I return Thy graces to Thee as the fountain returns its water to the stream; if, increasing in the love of virtue, I put forth, like the trees, the leaves and flowers of good works; if, despising the things of earth, I mount freely, like the birds, to heavenly things, and, breaking with the things of sense and the tumult of the world, I devote myself with my whole soul to Thee, then will my heart become for Thee a garden of delight."

Here, truly, is the joyous spirit and holy freedom of the saints, that large-mindedness which is not afraid to use the pleasant creatures of God equally with the unpleasant ones as stepping-stones to heaven; here is that true indifference preached so strenuously by St Ignatius two centuries later. Once only do we read that Gertrude was betrayed into a seemingly harsh judgment on the subject of earthly pleasure.

It was the Saturday before the carnival, and just after Lauds she heard the bell ringing for the breakfast of the labourers who worked on the monastery farm. With a deep sigh she exclaimed: "Alas! my Lord, how early do men rise to persecute Thee with their feasting!" But Christ, smiling gently at her replied: "Nay, dearest daughter; there is no need for sighing.

The men for whom the bell is ringing are not among those who offend Me by their gluttony. Their intention in this early meal is to fortify and encourage themselves for the work of the day. Therefore I delight in their repast as a man rejoices when he sees his beast feed heartily, knowing that it will serve him the better afterwards." Thus, by His patience and forbearance with her, our Lord taught Gertrude to be gentle and considerate towards others.

A quaint anecdote has come down to us illustrating the saint's simplicity in all these matters. During one of her many illnesses she had passed a wakeful night in close union with God and was well-nigh exhausted. Beside her bed was a small bunch of grapes left for her use by the infirmarian, and she took a few of these with the intention of refreshing our Lord in herself. He accepted her offering, saying: "Now, indeed, I am recompensed for the bitter drink given to Me when I hung upon the cross for love of you. Instead of the gall, I taste in your heart an indescribable sweetness, and the more you consider purely My glory in refreshing your body, the sweeter is the refreshment I find in your soul."

But, just as she was putting away the skins and stones of the grapes, she saw the devil picking them up to use them as a proof that she had committed a double fault by breaking the rule which forbade the religious to

eat before Matins, and by indulging herself on account of her infirmity. Hardly had Satan touched the skins, however, when he hastily dropped them; for he felt himself scorched and burned with torments so terrible that he fled howling from the house, taking care as he did so not to touch even a grape-stone lest it should cause him further pain.

Among other infirmities, Gertrude suffered from a weak heart, which made her incapable of any great exertion. One day she made this offering: "See, dearest Lord, I offer Thee my heart, weak as it is, with all its wishes and affections that Thou mayest take pleasure in it according to Thy will." Her Divine Master replied: "I accept the offering of your feeble heart and prefer it to any other stronger one, just as a hunter prefers meats from what he has spent much time and trouble in pursuing, to others easily obtained from domestic animals."

Some of Gertrude's sharpest attacks of pain were soothed by the visible presence of our Saviour, especially when those who waited upon her happened to overlook her wants. When the infirmarians realised that she had been left alone, they would redouble their attention, and then our Lord withdrew and the invalid's sufferings increased. One evening when something of this kind had occurred during the day, she was in such an agony of pain that she prayed for some little respite.

Pointing to an ornament upon His breast, Christ told her that she had placed it there by the love and patience with which she had borne her sufferings that day.

As the saint took note of the beautiful and flawless jewels, she rejoiced, seeing in their perfection a sign that her sufferings would soon be over. But Jesus, knowing her generosity, told her that the more her pain increased the more would the lustre of His ornament increase; for the setting of the jewels appeared yet but as dull gold awaiting the burnishing of further pain. Not long afterwards Gertrude was, in fact, visited with an attack of plague, not very violent, but sufficient to cause her much weariness and depression by depriving her of the opportunity of fulfilling her accustomed practices of devotion.

Perhaps it was at this time that the saint received a further pledge from heaven that her sufferings were sent to her by God as a sign of His favour. She had made an offering of all she endured whether in body or mind, and also of the intellectual and material pleasures she had to forego on account of her delicate health, when Jesus Christ appeared to her wearing on either hand a ring enriched with precious stones. The rings symbolised His pleasure in Gertrude's double gift, and after this she often repeated her offering.

One day as she was doing so, she felt our Lord touching her left eye with the ring on His left hand,

the one that represented her corporal sufferings. From that moment till the day of her death she felt extreme pain in this eye, but she understood at the same time that, as a ring is the sign of human espousals, so physical suffering is the badge of spiritual espousals between the soul and God.

It happened once that, a few days before some feast Gertrude felt one of her attacks of pain coming on, so she begged her Lord either to preserve her health or to mitigate her sufferings so that she might be able to assist at its celebration, declaring her readiness at the same time to receive whatever He chose to send. The answer to this request shows how much more pleasing in God's sight it is to accept what He arranges for us than to try to obtain the means of serving Him according to our own desires :—

“ In asking Me these things, and above all in submitting your will to My good pleasure, you lead Me into a garden of delights enamelled with all sorts of beautiful flowers, which is most agreeable to Me. But it is fitting I should let you know that, if I grant your desire and allow you to take an active part in celebrating this feast which is approaching, I shall be following you to where the flowers are which you like best ; whereas if I do not hear your prayer, and you go on patiently bearing your sufferings, you shall follow Me to those I like best. For I take more pleasure when, amid your

sufferings, you desire to serve Me actively than when you are filled with devotion through the gratification of your wishes."

On another feast, when Gertrude was unable to join in the chant on account of severe indisposition and headache, she asked our Lord why this so often happened to her on festivals. The reply showed how great is the purity of heart and detachment required by God from His saints: "It is for fear you should let yourself be carried away by the pleasure of singing and thus be rendered less fit to receive My grace." "But surely, dear Lord," she objected, "this misfortune could be prevented by Thy helping grace." To which our Lord replied: "It is a greater advantage to man when I prevent occasions of sin by sending some suffering, because there is the double merit of practising patience as well as humility."

Sometimes, in her more severe illnesses, Gertrude was unable during several days to fix her attention on spiritual things. Once, after her recovery, she remembered how she had thus seemed to neglect her Divine Spouse, and, much grieved, humbly confessed her fault to Him, fearing at the same time that it would be long before He renewed His favours. But she was mistaken, for Jesus bent tenderly towards her and said: "My child, you are always with Me, and all I have is yours," meaning that so long as she kept her will directed

towards God, it was not necessary for her to be always consciously united to Him.

But, although illness often prevented Gertrude from taking an active part in the religious life of her monastery, she, nevertheless, often went to listen to the other Sisters chanting the Divine Office in order to be able, at least by her presence, to offer herself a living sacrifice of praise to God. Now it sometimes happened that her devotion at these times was not so great as she would have wished, and, being somewhat discouraged, she complained of it to her Divine Master :

“What honour can I now render Thee, dearest Lord, as I sit here helpless and idle, hardly exerting myself to speak even a word or two in prayer, or to join ever so little in the sacred chant?” Our Lord consoled her, saying: “Would you not have some satisfaction if a friend offered you a draught of newly-made and delicious mead which you thought would strengthen you? Be assured, then, that I find real pleasure and satisfaction in the few words you say or chant to Me, because, few as they are, you offer them with the intention of praising Me.”

Another day, as she was sitting quietly in her place during Vespers, a great longing came upon her to take her share in the singing as she had formerly been wont to do, and she again gave expression to her grief: “Would it not give Thee more honour, dear Lord, if I

were in choir with the other Sisters, and if I fulfilled all the other community exercises properly instead of being obliged, as I now am by my great weakness, to spend long hours doing nothing?" Our Saviour replied: "Do you think that a bridegroom takes less pleasure in entertaining himself familiarly at home with his bride than when he proudly presents her, adorned in rich attire, before the eyes of his friends?" By this He meant the saint to understand that when God deprives a soul of the power to serve Him actively it does not prevent Him from finding delight within it. On the contrary, it rather enables Him to deal more freely with it, since there is less danger of vanity and self-complacency.

All the same Gertrude was very careful not to give way unduly to nature for the sake of taking care of her health. We find her consulting her Divine Master on such an apparently small matter as whether she should stand or sit for the gospel at Mass. Extreme weakness made all movement extremely painful to her, yet she wished to do what was most for God's glory, and was doubtful whether it would not be better, since her illness was incurable, to bear the suffering standing would cause her. Nothing could be more consoling than our Lord's answer:

"When you do anything with difficulty, or which is beyond your strength, I receive it as if I had absolute need of it for My honour; but when you omit anything

in order to take due care of your health, referring your act at the same time to My glory, I accept it as if I, being ill Myself, could not do without it. Therefore will I reward you in either case, in a manner befitting My glory and magnificence."

It would almost seem as if Gertrude found some difficulty in accepting this cross of ill-health, for the reason that it hindered the full exercise of her religious duties. Our Lord had, as it were, to work at this point for a long time before she fully learned the supreme lesson that the highest service a creature can offer to God is annihilation of self, even as Jesus Christ annihilated Himself to do the will of His Father.

Occasionally, indeed, our Lord lightened the saint's burden, but as a rule she had to bear her sufferings as patiently as she could. One year she begged Him to enable her to keep the fasting days with the other Sisters ; but He told her that, though the observance was pleasing to Him, yet if through obedience or necessity she were obliged to forego it, His pleasure would be the same.

Once, when Gertrude was sick of a violent fever, our Lord came to her radiant with beauty and holding health in one hand and sickness in the other. He bade her choose between them. But she would have neither. She only cast herself upon His Sacred Heart, desiring nothing but what He chose to give her. And turning her face away from Him she said : " See, dear Lord, I

turn my face away from Thee, desiring with my whole heart that Thou wilt not consider my wishes but will accomplish Thine own adorable Will in all that concerns me."

In return for her generosity our Lord caused two streams of grace to flow from His Heart to hers, saying: "From the moment when, in turning your face from Me, you renounced your own will, I have poured out upon you all the sweetness of My Heart." "My Lord," said Gertrude, "Thou hast so often given me Thy Heart, and in so many different ways; tell me, I pray Thee, what I shall gain by this new gift." Jesus replied: "Does not the Catholic faith teach you that he who communicates sacramentally but once, receives for his salvation all the riches of My Divinity and Humanity, and yet that the oftener men communicate the more they grow in grace and beatitude?"

Mental depression was a trial to which Gertrude was often subject, and up and down her life there occur references to her weakness and low spirits, or to the consolation she sought in heavenly things. Sometimes the depression was merely the effect of physical weakness and then she would exclaim: "What will become of me, Lord, and what dost Thou intend to do with me?" And Jesus would comfort her even as a mother comforts her little ones.

One day He asked her if she had ever seen a mother

caressing her children. Gertrude made no reply, because she had become an orphan and entered the monastery so young that she had never known a mother's love. However, our Lord reminded her that about six months before, she had watched a mother playing with her child, and He drew her attention to three points which had escaped her notice. First, the mother often asked the little one for a kiss; and the child, weak and unsteady as it was, had tottered towards her to give what she asked. So should we make efforts to rise to the contemplation of God. Again, the mother, though she kept asking the child whether it would like this or that, yet gave it nothing at all. In the same way does God deal with man, leaving him in uncertainty in order to reward him for his submission. Lastly, no one but the mother could understand the lisping accents of the child, a figure showing that God alone is judge of our intentions and that He will reward us accordingly.

Gertrude's low spirits were sometimes caused by the thought of her faults. Her conscience, supernaturally illumined, saw sins and imperfections where others could only see virtues; and she was constantly begging for prayers that she might correct herself. In all good faith her religious Sisters complied with her request and one of them received an answer from our Lord about it.

“What my chosen spouse takes for faults,” He said, “are rather the effects of the great graces showered upon

her. For, if my gifts in her were not hidden by seeming faults, she might be in danger of vain glory. A field covered with manure increases in fertility ; so, from her knowledge of her faults, she produces yet greater fruits of grace."

To another Sister who was struck by the fervent way in which Gertrude, who was reader for the week, brought out the words, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, &c." Jesus said : "From her childhood I have carried her in My arms, keeping her soul pure until she gave herself to Me with her whole will. Then I gave Myself entirely to her, putting Myself in return into her arms. This is why the great love she bears Me draws Me towards her ; and, as wax melts before the fire, so does My Heart melt with the ardour of her love and pass, drop by drop, into her soul. In her I take so much pleasure that often, when I am offended by others, I come to her for rest and comfort by afflicting her with some suffering of mind or body. This she accepts in union with My Passion, with so much gratitude, bearing it with such patience and humility, that My anger and sorrow are appeased and, for her sake, I pardon innumerable sinners."

Sometimes the thought of the graces she had neglected came to trouble Gertrude, but here again she was comforted by our Divine Lord, and she has left His words as a consolation for others. "God does not always

bestow His graces in such a way," she writes, "as to exact fruit from each one, seeing that human frailty makes this impossible. But the generosity of His love seems as if it could not contain itself; and, although He knows that each particular grace will not be used, He does not cease to heap up His favours, in order to gain men to Himself, and prepare for them an eternal reward. It is as with a child to whom lands and titles are left, for which he cares nothing at the moment, but which will be his rich inheritance when he grows up. In like manner, God, in conferring great graces upon His servants in this world, prepares for them an immense reward in the next."

Towards the end of her life, Gertrude was attacked by her seventh serious illness and was obliged to remain altogether in the infirmary. She spent the weary hours of the night in loving converse with her Divine Spouse, and was often favoured by His visible presence at her bedside. One night in particular, Jesus came to her with infinite tenderness, and held with her the following dialogue:—

Christ: Tell Me, My beloved, is it not with love for Me that you languish?

Gertrude: How could I, dear Lord, wretched sinner that I am, dare to say that I languish with love of Thee?

Christ: Whoever renounces his own will to suffer

anything for love of Me, can glory in his infirmity ; and in thus glorying he will tell Me that he languishes with love of Me, provided only that he suffers with patience and keeps his mind perseveringly fixed on Me.

Gertrude : And what canst Thou gain, dearest Lord, from this assurance ?

Christ : Such a sentiment will rejoice My Divinity and give glory to My Humanity. It is pleasing in My sight and a hymn of praise to delight Me. This practice will be a consolation to all who use it ; and it touches Me so much that it constrains Me to give grace to the contrite, to convert sinners and to release souls from purgatory.

Gertrude : And wilt Thou, dear Lord, after this, my seventh illness, give me back my former health ?

Christ : If, the first time you were ill, I had told you that you had yet to suffer seven different times, you would, perhaps, through human weakness have been afraid, and you might have given way to some impatience. So now, if I promised you health, the hope of coming to the end of your sufferings might diminish your merit. That is why, in My wisdom and care for you, I have left you in ignorance of one and the other in order that you may daily sigh after Me with your whole heart, offering to Me continually all your pains of mind and body. While you do this, I, on my part, will watch over you with such faithful and tender care as never to

permit you to be tried beyond your strength, for I know perfectly both your patience and your weakness. Consider, in proof of this, how you are actually less feeble now than you were after your first illness. Take courage then and trust to My goodness.

After this, Gertrude became quite indifferent as to whether she was ill or well. However long her attacks of suffering lasted, she did not ask how they would end, for by this time life and death were equally welcome to her, provided only that she was doing God's Will.

She seems somewhat to have misunderstood her own perfect dispositions with regard to the Will of God, and our Lord found it necessary to allay her anxiety by the following beautiful comparison: "When a bridegroom takes his bride into a garden of roses to gather for her a bouquet, the bride finds so much pleasure in his society that she does not stop to enquire which blossoms he will pluck, but accepts gladly each rose he gives her. So also, the faithful soul whose greatest pleasure is in doing My will, and who delights in it as in a garden of roses, accepts with equal gladness from My hands health or sickness, even if it be sickness unto death, for she abandons herself entirely to My loving care."

It happened that about this time there was question of the foundation of a new monastery at some distance from Helfta. Ill and suffering as she was, Gertrude's zeal for God's glory was enkindled, and she cast herself

before her crucifix, offering herself with her whole heart for this work if it should be God's Will. Our Lord accepted her desires, saying: "You are welcome, My dearest daughter, for you are as balm to My wounds and the sweetener of all My griefs."

Gertrude continued in prayer, thinking over things which, if she went to the new monastery, would be likely to promote God's glory and the good of souls. While she was thus preoccupied, all sorts of thoughts and plans presented themselves to her mind, until at last she had to take herself to task for spending her time in useless projects, such as would probably never come to pass, considering her feeble health and her inability to set out on a long journey. She reflected also that there was no need for haste; for, even if she were allowed to take part in this new foundation, there would still be ample time to mature her plans.

At that moment Jesus Christ again appeared to her, this time resplendent with glory and surrounded by fresh roses and lilies which symbolised Gertrude's thoughts and projects. "See," He said, "how I am glorified by your good-will!" "O God of my heart!" answered the saint, "why dost Thou embarrass my mind with so many ineffectual desires? Only the other day Thou didst inspire me with a longing to receive Extreme Unction and didst reward my desire with interior joy and consolation. To-day, on the contrary,

Thou dost incite me to offer myself for the establishment of a new monastery, a long way off, though I am so weak I can hardly walk across the room."

Jesus replied: "I do this because, as I told you when you began your book, I have chosen you to be a light to the Gentiles and an occasion of grace to innumerable souls. Therefore it is necessary that all should find in your writings whatever they require either for consolation or for instruction. Friends like to talk together over things which may never happen; and sometimes one proposes difficulties to the other in order to test his fidelity or to evoke a testimony of his good will. In like manner do I take pleasure in proposing to My elect many things which will never happen in order to make trial of their fidelity and affection, and also, as I count desires as good deeds done, in order to reward them for many zealous projects never to be realised.

"It was I, therefore, who prompted you to desire death and, consequently, made you eagerly wish for Extreme Unction. Moreover, I preserve in the depths of My Heart for your eternal salvation all that you have done in thought or action to prepare for this great Sacrament. Thus you may understand these words: 'The just man, if he be prevented with death, shall be in rest'*; for if you were deprived of this anointing by sudden death, or if you received it after you had lost

* Wisd; IV. 7.

consciousness, as often happens to My elect, you would not suffer any loss thereby. All that you have done during the last few years to prepare for death does not cease, in the unfading spring-time of My eternity and by virtue of My Divine co-operation, to grow, to blossom, and to fructify for your eternal salvation."

On yet another occasion, when Gertrude was imploring our Lord to show her mercy at the hour of her death, He replied: "How can I fail to accomplish what I have already begun." As she still feared that the longer her death was delayed the more her negligences would render her unfit for heaven, He said again. "All things are ordered by the wisdom of My Providence. Whatever you have once done is always before Me, and whatever you now add thereto shall not be lost."

Towards the end of her life, but while still able to go to church, the saint assisted at a sermon on Divine love which greatly touched her. The priest likened love to a golden arrow which obtained for itself all that it touched; and he dwelt upon the folly of using this arrow for earthly things when it might secure eternal joys. Gertrude exclaimed: "Oh, that I might have this arrow to pierce Thee with, my best Beloved, so that I might always have Thee for my own!" As she was speaking, Jesus Christ appeared to her, holding a golden arrow, which He directed towards her. "You

wish to wound Me," He said, "but I will pierce you in such a way that your wound will never be healed."

Then, with a pardonable, but merely human desire, Gertrude begged to be allowed to die there and then in the church, as if the holiness of the place would be of spiritual profit to her. Her request was not granted, but our Lord reassured her, saying: "When your soul goes forth from your body, I will hide you under My paternal care, as a mother would cover and hold tight against her breast her beloved child if she had to cross a stormy sea. And, as a mother would rejoice when she reached the land in safety, and would share her joy with her child, so will I, when you have paid the debt of death, take you to Myself to enjoy the unending delights of Paradise."

CHAPTER XIV

PEACE SURPASSING UNDERSTANDING

ON the feast of St Martin, about a year before her death, as the words of the Office reminded Gertrude that he had been favoured with a foreknowledge of the day of his happy passage to eternity, her own great longing to be with our Lord made her cry out: "O dearest Master, when wilt Thou show me a like favour?" To her great joy she received the answer: "Soon I will take you to Myself."

No further revelation was made to her on this subject until the following Easter week. After Holy Communion on the Thursday morning, while the Sacred Host still rested on her tongue, Jesus spoke to her saying: "Come, My beloved, and I will make in you My throne."* At once she recalled our Lord's

* Words of the ceremony for the Consecration of Virgins. Roman Pontifical.

promise and knew that the end of her life must be drawing near. "For the time you have yet to live," continued Jesus, "apply yourself solely to seeking My glory according to the bent of your own desires."

That she did not die immediately was an effect of God's exceeding love for her, thereby giving her an opportunity of preparing better and meriting more.

One Sunday, as she was wholly occupied with the thought of her approaching release, Jesus came again to her and said: "If you could accomplish at the moment of your death all that you have proposed to yourself for that supreme hour from your tenderest childhood upwards, it would be but little compared to the graces I will then freely bestow upon you." A little while after He added: "Choose which you prefer: either to die now or to earn fresh merit by a protracted illness, although I know you dread the imperfections which frequently accompany lingering ill-health."

But Gertrude only replied: "My Lord, may Thy Holy Will be done!" Christ went on: "You do well to leave the choice to Me. But, if for My love you will consent to remain longer on your earthly pilgrimage, I will dwell within your heart as a dove in its nest and at the same time I will cherish you in My bosom until your death, when I will conduct you to the land of rest, that land of perennial beauty and everlasting delight."

After this, Gertrude kept singing in her heart "My

dove in the clefts of the rock !” * and the knowledge of our Lord’s presence within her moderated her desire of death. But, after a time, she began again to languish for the moment of her deliverance from the trammels of this mortal life. Once more Jesus came to her and gently reproved her, saying : “ What bride ever desired the moment of reaching a place where she knew the bridegroom would cease preparing gifts for her, and where she herself could no longer make any gift to him ?” Gertrude knew by this that after death no man can add to his merits, or do or suffer anything for God. She roused her courage, therefore, and tried to bear up more patiently while her heavenly Bridegroom tarried on His way.

When she felt more than usually exhausted, our Lord told her to take it as a message from Him, warning her not to slumber or sleep, but to keep her lamp trimmed ready for His coming. “ How shall I know the hour of Thy arrival, dear Lord ?” she asked. “ I will send two princes of My heavenly court,” He answered, “ to sing sweetly in your ear : ‘ Behold the Bridegroom cometh ; go ye forth to meet Him.’ ”

Then Gertrude, taking up the figure of an earthly bridal feast, asked what chariot would take her along the royal way to the home of her Beloved, and what

* Cant. II. 14.

seat would be prepared for her. Jesus answered: "The powerful attraction of My love for your soul will come to you and bear you along to meet Me, and you will recline upon your trust in My goodness from which you have learnt to hope for all good things."

"Shall I have reins to guide my way?" she asked again. "Your love for Me and your longing to be united to Me will supply this need," replied our Lord. Thus did He sweetly humour the picture conjured up by the lively and poetic imagination of the saint, dealing with her as a mother deals with a little child. Gertrude's next remark shows her recognition of our Lord's condescension, and that all her love and trust in Him had returned. "I do not know, my dearest Lord, what else may be necessary for this journey, and I will not ask"—to which He replied: "However great your desires may be, your delights will infinitely surpass them. It is My pleasure to see how incapable is the human mind of forming any idea of the reward I prepare for My elect."

During these months of waiting for death, Gertrude spent her time meditating and praying, having often on her lips the words of the hymn *Jesu nostra redemptio*.* Her physical state varied very much—sometimes she

* Hymn written by St Ambrose for Ascension Day, and retained in its original form in the Benedictine Breviary. The Roman Office makes use of a version revised in the 17th century.

was better, sometimes much worse—but she turned everything into a means of uniting herself ever more closely to her beloved Jesus, and was often consoled by His visits or by the silent interior lights vouchsafed to her. Earlier in her life she had written out and recommended to others a five days' exercise in preparation for death; this she now made fervently herself, and, while thus occupied, she was favoured with wonderful visions in which our Lord gave her many tokens of His love.

He revealed to her the great merit of her sufferings, gave her a spiritual anointing, and showed her how closely her heart was united with His. When those around her attempted to relieve her pain, Gertrude would accept everything gratefully, saying as she did so: "O Lord, I offer to Thy eternal praise all the repose and comforts I shall henceforth take. Accept them, I beseech Thee, as though they were given to the members of Thine own sacred Body."

A week later she was rapt in ecstasy while thinking of the happiness of her first meeting with God after death. She saw all the glory and beauty of the saints, and thanked the Blessed Trinity for the merits of each. As she was doing the same for our Lady, that good Mother offered her own merits to her Son for her. Jesus clothed Gertrude in them and accepted for her also the merits offered by the saints. "This is a consolation of which I am not worthy, Lord," she said,

“for I have never rendered fitting homage to Thy saints; nor do I recall a single occasion on which I have asked them to assist me at the hour of my death. Rather have I placed my whole trust in Thee, the Sanctifier of the saints.”

Our Lord reassured her, saying that this would only be the greater reason for their coming to her aid; promising, moreover, to come Himself with them. Gertrude's desire for death was inflamed once more and she exclaimed: “Ah! my most faithful Lord, when wilt Thou come and lead me from the prison-house of this world to everlasting bliss?” Our Lord bade her wait yet a little while. “Will a royal bride,” He said, “for whom a great reception is being prepared, complain of a short delay, when the bridegroom takes advantage of it to lavish tender caresses upon her?” Gertrude, with her heart all aglow, cried out: “What canst Thou find in me, vile refuse of the world, to please Thee, that Thou speakest thus?”

Jesus replied: “I find Myself in you, by the union established between us by the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, a union which cannot take place once this life is over. In giving Myself to you I find greater delight than is found in any human love. Earthly testimonies of love are but transitory; they change and decay, but the sweetness of the union contracted between you and Me in Holy Communion is unchangeable; and

the more often it is renewed the more strong and vigorous it becomes.”

The sweetness which filled Gertrude’s soul during her last days on earth, overflowed upon all who came near her. She received each one graciously and helped all by loving words of instruction and counsel. The Sisters rivalled one another in praying fervently for her and begged God to leave her with them just a little longer. In spite of her great sufferings she lingered on, as it were for the consolation of those who prayed for her and with her, and for her own merit.

No account of the actual death of the saint has been preserved; but all that was to happen to her at that supreme moment was shown to her beforehand. The description of this vision shall be given exactly as it is related by the companion who helped the saint in all her writings.

It seemed to her that in her last agony she was reposing on our Lord’s bosom, supported by His left hand, against His Sacred Heart, and under the form of a young maiden beautifully apparelled. The angels and saints approached with great joy and in an infinite multitude, each one with a thurible containing the meditations, prayers and devotions of the whole Church, which ascended like fragrant incense before the King of Glory in favour of His spouse.

As she invoked the Blessed Virgin, Jesus called His

Mother to come and console her ; and Mary, brilliant with splendour, bent down and gently supported Gertrude's head. The saint's Angel Guardian rejoiced in the happiness of the soul confided to his care ; and, when she invoked the glorious St Michael, this prince of the heavenly court presented himself before her, with a multitude of angels, offering his services to combat the demons, who were also present, and to frustrate their snares.

The devils appeared in the form of toads and serpents, crouching in a corner, but so powerless that they could not make even the slightest effort against the soul of the dying saint, without falling back in confusion, crushed and disconcerted by the majesty of the heavenly hosts, a circumstance which afforded Gertrude no slight consolation.

At this moment there came from the mouth of Gertrude a column of brilliant light, typical of the devotion hidden in her heart and reaching up to the throne of God. The rays were so resplendent that they terrified the evil spirits who fled into hiding and troubled the servant of God no further. Then, as she called the saints to her aid according to their different orders, as they are invoked in the prayers appointed by the Church for the dying, each hierarchy came with great reverence to do her service.

The Patriarchs brought verdant branches covered

with the fruit of their good works, and disposed them round her couch. The Prophets came with golden mirrors and arranged them also around her, giving her great delight. Next appeared her own protector, St John the Evangelist, who placed on her finger a golden ring in token of his fidelity, and the other Apostles, who followed him, did in like manner. The Martyrs came bearing golden palms which glittered bright, as emblems of all they had endured for Christ; and the Confessors bore golden flowers in remembrance of their readiness to follow the call of God.

After these came the Virgins who offered to Gertrude beautiful roses with gold-tipped petals representing their nearness to God; for Jesus Himself had His garments adorned with similar roses equal in number to the choir of Virgins, who seemed to make over to Gertrude all their merit. As soon as the saint had been decorated with these flowers, her Divine Spouse bent down to her and she was united to Him so closely that she experienced inexpressible delight.

The Holy Widows and all the saints now offered their good works to Gertrude in golden caskets, and their merits were reflected in her soul as if she had herself been a partaker in their beatitude. Even the Holy Innocents sent down upon her the bright rays of their spotless lives; and helped to make her still more beautiful in the eyes of her Heavenly Spouse.

Finally, the Son of the Most High God, the King of Glory, inclined towards her with infinite tenderness, as if to bestow a kiss upon His spouse who was still resting upon His bosom. And this action of the Sun of Justice drew her blessed soul completely to Himself, even as the mid-day sun absorbs the sparkling dew-drop. Ennobled already as she was by the virtues and merits bestowed upon her by the saints, Gertrude was now completely immersed in God, and was made like to Him, for she was standing at last before Him, face to face, in the City of Peace.

CHAPTER XV

THE SPIRIT OF ST. GERTRUDE

MANY think of St. Gertrude as a wonderful mystic, raised so far above the things of this world as to be altogether inimitable, or so far lost in the things of God as to be no fit model for ordinary men and women who have to work out their salvation amidst the wear and tear of modern life. It is true that from her childhood Gertrude was kept free from all contact with the world, and that she grew up in the sheltered atmosphere of a Benedictine cloister; but the character of her sanctity is not altered for that, nor is her life less fraught with useful lessons, not only for religious, but for Christians living in the world and exposed to the dangers of the infidelity, or, worse still, of the indifference of the twentieth century.

What then is the characteristic of this hidden Benedictine nun, that causes her to be placed before the whole Christian world by our holy Mother the Church

as a model worthy of imitation? It is the manliness of a true Catholic, combined with the tenderness of an ardent lover of Christ. The ideal character which she set before herself was the character of Jesus Christ, and day by day her soul was fashioned into His likeness.

The process was a painful one, for the chisel of God's love worked unsparingly upon her; but she cheerfully embraced all that it cost her, entering generously into His designs in her regard, because she well knew that she was thereby becoming more fit to take her place as a living stone in the spiritual house of God.

Let us, then, look well into her life and see in what the chief elements of her sanctity consisted. First, there was her deep humility, and its sister virtue simplicity. Gertrude never thought of herself, and never attributed to her own merits the marvels God worked in her soul. Not that she undervalued what God did for her, or failed to recognise the gifts bestowed upon her; this would have been contrary to her perfect truthfulness. But, just because humility is truth, she saw that all these graces came to her straight from God; and so she used them for His glory, saying often to herself: "If, later on, I suffer, as I deserve, the torments of hell, I shall still rejoice to see the gift of God bearing fruit in others."

Vain glory was no snare to her childlike soul; and if it happened at prayer or during the performance of

some good work that a thought of self-esteem presented itself to her mind, she did not banish it at once as if she were afraid of it, but turned it into an occasion of advancing God's interests: "If anyone seeing me thus engaged tries to imitate me, all the better!" she would say; "it is at any rate something gained for the Kingdom of God."

To humility Gertrude joined a wise discretion, that "mother of all the virtues," as it is called in the rule of St Benedict. While many who flocked to her for advice were excited to admiration by the wisdom of her words and counsels, she would take no step in her own spiritual life without consulting others, even persons much inferior to herself, treating them with such deference that she often abandoned her own ideas to follow their suggestions.

Yet she did all this with great liberty of spirit, acting freely and promptly, and never for a single moment consenting to anything contrary to her conscience. Our Lord Himself bore witness to the untrammelled simplicity of all her dealings. Being asked on one occasion what pleased Him most in His chosen handmaid, He replied: "Her liberty of heart." Surprised at this and thinking it but a little matter, the questioner said: "I thought Thy grace had already lifted this soul to a high degree of knowledge, and to a still more sublime fervour of Divine love." Our Saviour answered:

“ Without doubt it is as you think ; but it is her liberty of spirit which carries her to this height of perfection. At whatever hour I come to her, I find her ready for My gifts because she is entirely detached from earthly things.”

A characteristic growing out of this liberty of heart and mind and intimately connected with it, was Gertrude's spirit of praise. Everything with her was turned to the praise of God ; she used her practices of devotion or left them with equal readiness. She was not dependent even upon the Sacraments when God deprived her of them, but kept herself always close to Him who alone was the source of all her strength ; and followed the movements of His grace from moment to moment. She had no particular devotions ; for all the interests of Christ were her interests.

It was again this liberty of spirit which made Gertrude so perfect a child of the Church. Drawing her inspirations from the Divine Liturgy her mind was one with that of the Church and with Christ its Head. And, lest it should seem that a conspicuous element of modern Catholic life was undeveloped in St Gertrude, namely, loyalty to the Pope, let it be remembered that in her time things were very different. The Papacy was at the height of its power and splendour, if this can be said of a sovereignty which can neither increase nor diminish. All civilised Europe was Catholic, and many

princes—like John of England—acknowledged the Pope as temporal overlord. St Gertrude's loyalty to the Holy See was, therefore, an integral part of Catholic life calling for no special mention.

Holy Mass, the Sacraments, prayer, meditation, the sanctification of ordinary actions, and charity towards her neighbour, were the means Gertrude made use of to attain holiness; and these are at the disposal of everyone. It was not her raptures and ecstasies that raised her to the height of perfection, but her fidelity to grace and the careful use she made of ordinary means of sanctification. In one sense there was nothing extraordinary in her life. She did not, like St Catherine of Siena, live for years on no other food but the Blessed Eucharist; nor did she practise very great austerities. Indeed, as we have seen, she was not able to perform even those prescribed by her rule. But, by keeping herself closely united to Christ our Lord, and allowing Him to work freely in her soul, she attained that sublime degree of union with God which is the essence of all sanctity.

Another characteristic of Gertrude was her ardent love for our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. If, as is probable, she received a particle of a consecrated host immediately after her baptism, Jesus took possession of her from the very first; and her whole life, with the exception, perhaps, of the time when she was taken up

with a too great love of study, was one long act of the love of God. The thought of Jesus sweetened all that was bitter ; and so jealous of her love was her Divine Master, that He often allowed those she helped to be ungrateful or exacting that so all her affections might be thrown back upon Him.

It was this love that made her refer everything to Jesus as to a most dear friend. She did nothing without consulting Him ; she confided to Him all that troubled her ; and, without hesitation, begged favours for all who needed them. With this love and trust came also a most wonderful spirit of thanksgiving, which, in its turn, became effective reparation. We find her constantly making amends to our Lord for her own negligences, and for the neglect and indifference of others.

Several times a year Gertrude was accustomed to set apart a portion of time for recalling the graces bestowed upon her by God. Abasing herself before Him, she begged that her deficiencies might be made good, and then broke out into acts of praise and gratitude. The following extracts from one of her prayers composed for such occasions may fittingly close this imperfect sketch of her marvellous life :—

“ I praise and glorify Thy long-suffering patience which bore with me while I passed the years of childhood, girlhood and youth in such blindness and folly that if

Thou hadst not preserved me by inspiring me with a natural horror of evil and inclination to good, or by the reproofs of others ; if, finally, thou hadst not saved me by Thy mercy, I should have sinned at every opportunity without remorse of conscience, as if I had been a pagan in the midst of pagans. And this, although from my very infancy, namely in my fifth year, Thou didst make choice of me to live among Thy most faithful friends in the sanctuary of holy religion.

“Although Thine infinite beatitude, O my God, can be neither increased nor diminished, and Thou standest not in need of Thy creatures, nevertheless my life, so full of faults and negligences, has in some sort interfered with Thy glory, when all that I am, as well as all creatures, ought continually to be contributing to Thy praise. . . .

“In order to render Thee due thanksgiving, I plunged myself into the abyss of my own nothingness, whither Thine exceeding mercy followed me ; and I bless and praise the sweetness of Thy bounty by which, at a time when my life was so disordered, Thou didst think thoughts of peace concerning me, O Father of mercies, and not thoughts of affliction.* By the multitude and greatness of Thy benefits Thou didst then exalt me, as if, beyond other mortals, I were living on this earth the life of angels.

* Jer. xxix, 11,

“Thou didst begin this work in me during the Advent preceding the feast of the Epiphany on which I completed my twenty-fifth year, by exciting within me a kind of trouble which caused me to experience a great distaste for all the foolishness of youth ; and thus my heart was prepared to some extent for Thy coming. In fact, just after I had begun my twenty-sixth year, a little before the feast of the Purification, at eventide, after Compline, encompassed as I was by distress, Thou Who art the true Light, didst extinguish my youthful follies, which had hidden from me the spiritual darkness of my soul.

“At that hour Thou didst deign to appear before me in a sweet and wonderful manner ; and, after lovingly reconciling Thyself to me, Thou didst teach me the knowledge of Thy love ; making me enter into myself, for, up to that time I had had no perception of my interior state. Afterwards, by secret and marvellous ways, Thou didst bring it about that in my heart Thou couldst always take Thy delight, as a friend treats with his friend, or rather, as a bridegroom with his bride. . . .

“To perpetuate this tender intercourse, Thou hast visited me at divers times and in divers manners ; but more especially and with greater condescension on the eve of the Annunciation and before the Ascension, beginning Thy work that day in the early morning and completing it in the evening after Compline. Then it

was that Thou didst confer on me that most astonishing gift worthy of the respect of all creatures, namely, that from that hour up to the present I have never felt that Thou wert absent from me, even for an instant, at whatever time I visited Thee in my heart, except on one occasion only, for a space of eleven days. . . . Among Thy favours there are two which I especially value ; first, the impress Thou didst make upon my heart of Thy most precious Wounds ; and, secondly, the wound of love which Thou didst truly and efficaciously inflict thereon. Hadst Thou bestowed on me no other consolation, Thou hast given me in these two gifts so great happiness that, were I to live a thousand years, I could not exhaust all they contain of sweetness, consolation and instruction.

“ Thou hast also vouchsafed, amidst all these favours, to admit me to the precious intimacy of Thy friendship, by putting at my disposal, in divers ways, the sacred Ark of Thy Divinity—I mean Thy deified Heart—that I may find therein all that delights me. Sometimes Thou didst give it to me freely ; sometimes Thou didst exchange it for my own, as a pledge of the intimate union established between us. By it Thou hast revealed to me many of Thy secrets, Thy anger or Thy delight ; and through it Thy tenderness has often, as it were, melted my whole soul. . . .

“ But there is one gift which ought to be preferred

to all the rest, and which I have very often received : a union so intimate to which Thou didst lead me, or rather ravish me, that I marvel greatly that, after such moments of bliss, I have been able to live an ordinary life among men. And what astonishes me yet more and horrifies me, is that since this favour I have not, alas ! corrected my faults as justice demanded. But, after all this, the source of Thy bounty is not yet dried up, O Jesus, Thou Who of all lovers art the most loving ; or rather, Who art the only One Who lovest ungrateful men truly and disinterestedly. . . .

“ Behold, O loving Lord, the talent of Thy condescending intimacy confided to the most vile and unworthy of creatures. I give it back to Thee for love of Thy love and for the increase of Thy glory, as well in what I have written as in what I have yet to write. And I can boldly declare, by Thy grace, that I have never said or written anything on this subject without the concurrence of Thy Will and with the desire of promoting Thy glory and the good of souls. . . . I desire, for Thy greater glory, that men may be found, who, reading these things, may taste the sweetness of Thy love ; and, following Thy divine attraction, may experience yet greater delights in the inmost sanctuary of their hearts. . . .

“ O Almighty Lord, Thou Who dost distribute all good things, deign to feed us abundantly with this heavenly



CHURCH OF ST. GERTRUDE THE GREAT EISLEBEN

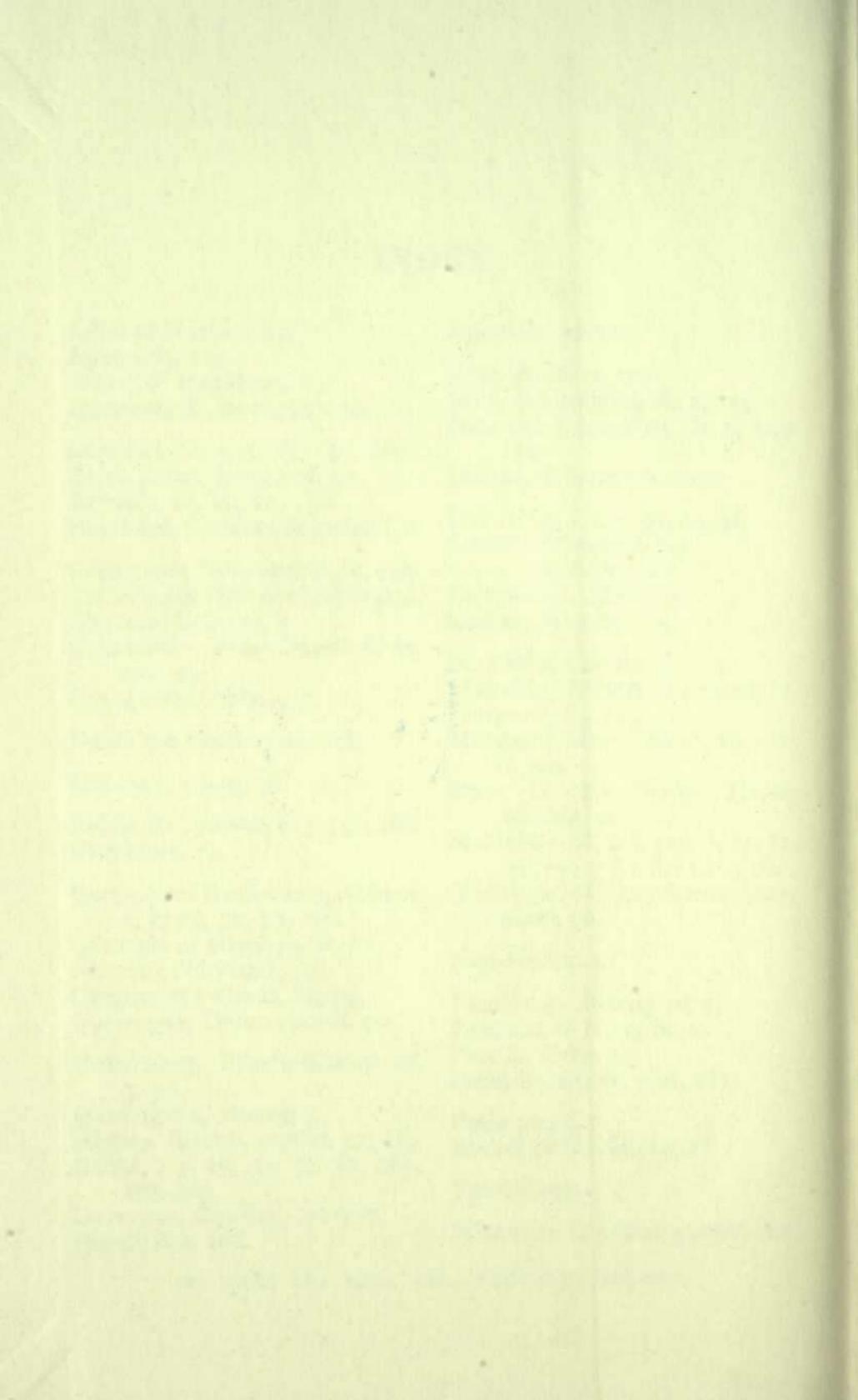
manna during the time of exile, until the day when 'we all, beholding the glory of the Lord with open face, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.' (II. Cor. iii. 18.)

"But, in the meantime, according to Thy faithful promise and the humble desire of my heart, inspire all, who with a lowly spirit read these writings, with the thought of praising Thee for Thy great goodness, and for the compassion Thou hast had on my unworthiness; and let them be moved with sorrow and a desire of their own amendment and of advancing in the spiritual life. May their hearts, aflame with love, be like golden censers, sending up sweet perfumes before Thee; so that, in some sort, they may atone for my negligence and ingratitude. Amen."

LAUS DEO SEMPER!

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