

# Saint Gerard Majella

One afternoon in May more than two hundred years ago a little band of Redemptorist missionaries stood on the ribbon of road that stretched from Muro, in Southern Italy, to Rionero. They were grouped around a tall, gaunt young man who had pursued them for miles. They knew well the delicate frame, the pale face, and the dark, eager eyes. The young man had pestered them all during the mission in Muro. Now he knelt panting in the dust of the country road and renewed his request to be accepted as a Redemptorist Brother. Pityingly they shook their heads. One so delicate as he could never stand the hard life of a Brother. 'Try me' he persisted, 'then you can send me away'. At long last, because of his persistence and reputation for virtue, they agreed. And back at his home his mother, who had locked him in his room to prevent him from following the Fathers, found a rope (improvised from a bed-sheet) dangling from an open window and on the table a brief note: 'I have gone to become a saint'.

Today in his native Muro there is a bronze statue to that young man. Become a saint he did, and his fame has gone out from Italy to the entire world as St. Gerard Majella.

Gerard was the son of a struggling tailor. From his childhood he seems to have been specially marked out for divine favours, one of these 'infant prodigies' in the world of grace who early showed an extraordinary fondness for prayer, the Sacraments, fasting and long solitary visits to the church.

## THE WORKERS' SAINT

When Gerard was twelve, his father died. The boy was apprenticed to a tailor, a good employer, who did not interfere with the young worker's prayers. But the foreman, a bully, cursed and beat the boy cruelly. Gerard took it all, literally, with a smile: 'God's hand is beating me. I deserve it'. He forgave the foreman and even shielded him from punishment. Later he accepted employment, which meant three years of drudgery and the lash of a bitter tongue, which hurt more than blows. Again there was no complaint. At twenty, Gerard was able to set up as an independent tailor, did his work well and cheaply, and showed himself strictly honest: 'he never defrauded anyone of as much as a piece of thread'. And all the time there was unending prayer, fasting and, despite his none too robust health, penance's whose mere recital causes a shudder among easy-going moderns.

Gerard was twenty-three when he made his dramatic and finally successful bid to become a Redemptorist Brother. He looked so frail that the Fathers thought he would prove \*a useless Brother\* as far as work was concerned. The monastery was poor, life was hard, but to everyone's amazement Gerard did 'the work of four'. He died before he was thirty, yet as though he were destined to serve as model for every class of worker, he was in turn gardener, sacristan, cook, tailor, refectorian, infirmarian, carpenter and doorkeeper. He was the ideal Brother—one who joined prayer and union with God to the work of his hands. A witness described him as 'a man made entirely for God, unable to remain a single instant without God'.

## FRIEND OF THE POOR

Gerard himself knew poverty. All during his life he showed a sympathetic understanding of the secret sorrows of the poor. Before he became a Redemptorist, he gave away his earnings, even his own food to the needy and brushed remonstrance aside with the words: 'God will provide'<sup>9</sup>. When he became doorkeeper in the monastery, he was equally open-handed, even with those who tricked him. He was especially kind to the respectable poor, mothers and widows who were ashamed to beg. The poor and the sick are Christ visible to our eyes', he said. With a loaf or a coin went fruitful advice for the soul. His poor never went empty-handed. Sometimes how the food came to be there was known only to God and to Gerard.

## PATRON OF A GOOD CONFESSION

An outstanding fact in Gerard's life was his God-given power to read the consciences of men. Again and again men and women stood aghast as Gerard reminded them—strongly if necessary—of secret serious sins unconfessed. So sacrilegious confessions were repaired or prevented. To the scrupulous, too, Gerard gave peace. He settled vocations, helped many to give themselves to God. Religious, priests, confessors applied to him to have their doubts cleared up. To-day grateful souls call Gerard 'Patron of a Good Confession'. In the REDEMPTORIST RECORD (November-December, 1937), is the following: 'For twenty-five years I concealed a grave sin in Confession. Then I prayed fervently to St. Gerard and got the grace to humble myself and confess. Anyone who puts faith in St. Gerard will not do so in vain'.

## THE MOTHERS' SAINT

God seems to have given Gerard special power to help mothers. During his life he showed that power more than once. Since his death his help has been so great and so frequent that he is often called 'the Saint of happy deliveries'. Thousands of mothers have lived to thank and love this 'Saint you can sit down and chat to' thousands of boys and girls have been given his name in gratitude. To-day there is a movement to have him declared patron of expectant mothers. ST. GERARD'S LEAGUE has been established to win the Saint's powerful help for all mothers in their fight against a pagan world.

## GERARD THE SAINT

Gerard's life tells of miracles. But the Saint was not always working miracles nor did he become a saint because of them. He became a saint because he did all things supremely well out of love for God, whether it was plying a needle, using a spade, sweeping a floor or telling his beads. No one ever saw him violate even the smallest prescription of his Rule. His obedience was exact and literal. At death he could say: 'I have done everything for the love of God . . . His will has been my will. I have desired only what He wished. And so I die in peace.

During Holy Mass, after Holy Communion, often even during his work, he was lost in God. His love for Mary was second only to his love for Jesus. Her shrines were magnets for a heart that was hers from his childhood, the heart of a child and a lover. Love for his neighbour, purity, humility, penance, zeal, he showed to such a degree that he seemed 'more an angel than a man'.

When he was only twenty-nine, tuberculosis struck him down. He suffered much, but without complaint united all his pains with those of Jesus Crucified. The Mother of God did not forget her faithful son in his last hour. As Gerard was awaiting death, watchers saw his face grow radiant with unearthly splendour. 'There is the Madonna!' he cried, 'Let us honour her!' A little before midnight, 15th October 1755, Gerard died. His last words summed up a life of heroic holiness: 'My God, I wish to die in order to do Your most holy will'