

MOTHER ILLUMINATA TOMASELLI

(July 30, 1879 - October 15, 1963)

Mother Illuminata Tomaselli, Beatrice, was born at San Lorenzo Maggiore, Provincia di Benevento, Italy, on July 30, 1879, of Joseph Tomaselli and Mariana Aaron De Libero. Orphaned at a very tender age, little Beatrice was received into the Orphanage of the Congregation, at Angri, when seven years old.

Thus even as a child, she learned lessons in humility, simplicity and charity from the sainted Founder of the incipient Congregation who left an indelible mark on her spiritual life and development. She grew up in an atmosphere of idealism, genuine virtue and faith in Divine Providence, living day by day, without ever a thought for the morrow, in the unshaken certainty that the good Lord, Who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the trees with awe-inspiring magnificence, would come to the succor of those devoted to His cause, at the Little House of Divine Providence.

Young Beatrice must have witnessed many a tangible proof of simple faith rewarded, when the Holy Founder, threatened by enraged creditors, or pressed by the Community cook, summoned the congregation to chapel for special prayers to Our Lady of Sorrows, whose beggar he professed to be, that she disentangle him from the hurdle in which he found himself and send bread and other victuals to his orphans and money to pay his debts.

On September 27, 1897, mature enough to be admitted to the religious reception, Beatrice Tomaselli received the holy habit at the hands of the beloved Founder, who earlier, had received her as an orphan and nurtured her unusual virtues, these many years. A full fledged member of the Institute now, with the new habit also Beatrice received a new name - Sister Illuminata - very appropriate indeed, for one so close to God and so enlightened in the ways of the soul.

Her noviceship days were marked by exceptional piety, humility, and spirit of poverty, character traits which distinguished her throughout her religious life. Very well may Sister Illuminata be likened to St. Francis of Assisi who, called by God to live in want, trusting only in His Providence, reveled in poverty as ordinary people of means revel in riches, considered himself fortunate to be deprived of all earthly goods. Sister Illuminata always sought the worst for herself whether in clothes, furniture or any creature comfort, her dearest desire to enrich herself with the merits of holy poverty.

On May 31, 1900, Sister Illuminata pronounced her first vows; On May 30, 1901 her second; and on May 31, 1902, again she renewed her fidelity to God with the three vows of religion. Then on May 31, 1903, our eager devout religious pronounced her vows for three years, the equivalent of perpetual vows, perennial, indissoluble bond of fealty between her soul and her God.

Seasoned in hardship, stress and the thousand natural shocks life is heir to, Sister Illuminata was considered eligible for a special mission field which beckoned from the vastness of the Atlantic to those Baptistines who were willing to weather the storms of the early American foundation without succumbing to discouragement or depression.

On November 23, 1904, Sister Illuminata, commissioned by the holy Founder, arrived in the United States, and, fortified and made bold by holy obedience and love of God, was ready to accept whatever hardships and trials the life of the early Baptistines presented. Sister shared with the other pioneers the humiliation of rejection on the part of the Catholic Hierarchy, always retaining her spiritual and mental composure, in the absolute certainty that more often than not, the works sanctioned by Almighty God, elicit the rebuff and ridicule of the very same persons who should be the staunchest supporters of their cause.

Sister Illuminata joined the small group of valiant women, the first Baptistines to put foot on American soil, in a small orphanage they established in Brooklyn, New York, where they awaited the dawn of better days for the beloved Congregation. Their hearts leapt with joy, when, in 1906, with the blessings and authorization of His Excellency Bishop O'Connor of Newark Archdiocese, the humble Baptistines were called to direct St. Lucy's School and Orphanage, situated at Amity Place, Newark, New Jersey, by the late Pastor, Monsignor Joseph Perroti.

Sister Illuminata's sweet duty was to care for the orphans, in the capacity of prefect. What but loving vigilance, maternal interest and solicitude for the youthful lives she was to tend so gently and delicately, even as a diligent gardener would nurture tender flowers?

Soon the Catholic Hierarchy, who a few years earlier, had rejected the Sisters of St. John the Baptist as foreigners and inept, accorded them the recognition and credit due to their virtue, unflinching spirit of sacrifice and selfless activity. On September 6, 1911, the Baptistines were called to direct St. Anthony's School, Albany, New York.

The logical choice for the office of Superior was Mother Illuminata, an office which she held with dignity, motherly interest for the Sisters and for the school children. The dignity of her office did not dazzle Mother Illuminata who, during her tenure, retained her humility, simplicity and Christ-like charity. She did not sit in the isolation of her room but went about doing good, washing and mending the Sisters' clothes, cooking their meals and, the sweetest of all duties, teaching the young adolescents in the parish school.

On August 15, 1919, Mother was transferred to St. Lucy's School and Orphanage, Newark, New Jersey, the cradle of the Institute, to direct its destiny and that it might emerge as a fine school, with high standards of achievement in the cultural and moral fields. More experienced in the art of government, Mother Illuminata continued the apostolate, giving herself freely and unstintingly, with characteristic selflessness of her youthful soul.

Under Mother's inspired and intelligent leadership, St. Lucy's School and Orphanage witnessed a progress heretofore unknown. The number of children in both institutions increased and the scholastic standards became higher, to the delight of the Reverend Pastor, faculty and parents.

In 1922, Mother Illuminata celebrated her Silver Jubilee, amid the rejoicing of her spiritual daughters and children. There were flowers and songs for dear Mother, High Mass and felicitations for the humble little nun who so well embodied the spirit of the holy Founder and of the early pioneers, who had guided her faltering steps when she entered the Institute.

In 1925, Mother Illuminata was called upon to shoulder graver

responsibilities. The General Council in Rome appointed her Commissary for the North American Community - office equivalent to that of Visitor, Mother's humility would have recoiled from the honor but was she not the humble maid of the Lord, ready to pronounce her unconditional "Fiat" in all circumstances? The office only meant more extensive practice of charity toward the erring and virtuous alike; greater sacrifices and longer hours of prayer that the Institute move swiftly and steadily towards those goals she had set before herself and her spiritual daughters.

On July 9, 1929, Mother was transferred to Mt. St. John Academy, then St. John's School and Orphanage, situated on the beautiful Mosle Estate, whose acquisition she had sanctioned three years before. Under her direction, St. John's School and Orphanage made rapid strides in all fields of endeavor, the Orphanage for boys and girls reaching a record number never to be repeated in the history of the school. A new wing was added in 1934, on the right side of the Administration Building, housing dormitories for boys and elementary school classrooms.

In 1937, Mother Illuminata was transferred to Providence Rest, Bronx, N.Y., whence she was recalled to direct Mt. St. John Convent, White Plains, N.Y., Mother's last assignment in the Congregation she had helped plant on American soil, and seen grow into a sturdy tree whose branches lift up their heads into many skies.

Even though in poor health, Mother continued her indefatigable labors among the Sisters and was exceedingly glad when, in 1938, Mt. St. John Convent welcomed the Novices and Postulants come to take up residence there. Mother's declining health and advancing age did not stifle the spark of vitality and enthusiasm of her younger days, for she remained a lover of youth, lavishing her affection and solicitude on the novices and postulants who found in her a veritable Mother, rich in wisdom, experience and gentle graces.

Mother shunned personal publicity, honors and recognition but sought them for the Congregation. Her free time was spent in prayer, before the Blessed Sacrament, where she often prolonged her loving vigil into the night, her devotion to the Eucharistic King overcoming fatigue, sleep and weariness. On September 23, 1947, in the presence of the entire Community, convened to White Plains to extend good wishes and felicitations to the beloved Jubilarian, (who looked upon the festivities as unmerited and would have much preferred to mark the anniversary in silence) the event was celebrated.

The steady flow of young applicants into the Novitiate made it imperative to remove the novices and postulants from White Plains. Those who witnessed the transition say that Mother Illuminata took it very much to heart. With her advancing age, rapidly declining health and native sensitiveness, when the little army of youth departed for larger quarters, on Long Island, N.Y., something died in Mother, for a little particle of her heart went with them. From then on, she became noticeably feebler, mentally and physically, even though still holding her own as Superior of Mount St. John Convent. The day of complete surrender to holy obedience was not long to come for it soon became evident that Mother could no longer carry the burden of Superiorship without detriment to her health. When she was relieved of the office, on November 26, 1957, she remained as calm and tranquil as she had always been, spending more time in chapel praying for the beloved Institute and for the world. Never a word of complaint, or resentment but merely silence,

a faint smile, prayer penance and love.

On April 4, 1958, Mother retired to the Mother House, Angri, Italy, closer to the mortal remains of the Venerated Founder, where she spent many a silent hour in prayer. Senility set in with an accelerated tempo and in a few years Mother became unable to help herself. But she was ever the same dear soul, beads rattling through her fingers, eyes fixed on the large Crucifix in the Convent Chapel, whether fully cognizant or not.

Mother's last days on earth, as well as her death, echoed her long fruitful life, -- a breath of peace, serenity and love for God. She went to her eternal repose on October 15, 1963.

What the image Mother Illuminata projected since her entrance into the Congregation? A model religious -- true embodiment of the virtues of the early Founders, fully convinced that for those who love God suffering is the air they breathe, humble, patient, gentle and compassionate; a lover of Christ crucified and of the Institute -- this was Mother Illuminata.

May she enjoy the eternal repose of the just even as she awaits the resurrection of the body, on the last day.