The Little Flower's First Communion

By One of Her Teachers

This month the Golden Jubilee of the First Communion of St. Thérèse is Being Celebrated in Her Old School . . . The Following Reminiscences Have Been Written by a Nun of the Abbey

This day chosen for First Communion was usually the octave of Ascension Thursday. In this year of 1884, however, on account of the illness of Mother Princess, whose death was feared to be imminent, the chaplain decided to have the ceremony two weeks earlier. It was accordingly set for May 8.

For the previous month the First Communicants were required to become full boarders, so that they might find it easier to attend Mass every morning and prepare in greater perfection for the coming of Jesus. Accordingly Thérèse had her little cot bed in the dormitory. "Every night," she writes, "the first Mistress (Mother St. Chad) used to come with her little lamp and gently open the curtains of my bed and imprint a tender kiss on my forehead. She kissed me so much attention that touched by her goodness I said to her one night: 'Mother, I like you so well that I am going to tell you a great secret.' Then mysteriously drawing in the precious little book from Carlota (given to her by her sister Carlota three months before the great day) hidden under my pillow, I showed it to her, my eyes glinting with joy. She seemed to me very carefully, looked through it attentively and impressed on me the following words: 'Fate, I was so much by the direction of the Carmelite Nuns, they listened with delight to the spiritual reading, the hymns, to the rosary which they loved so to love hearing from the lips of the nuns. Thérèse adds (The Story of a Soul, chapter IV): "I was not alone among my little companions because of the great功效 which my dear Lionel had given me. I wore it in my belt just as missionaries do, and it was thought that I was trying to copy my Carmelite sister."

The program was interrupted by pleasant recreations and by walks in the orchards, the children singing as they went. Then above all there was the visit to the Blessed Sacrament, and three hours a day the teaching of Abbé Domitien, chaplain to the Abbey, who was so successful in coming down to the level of his young listeners. "I listened with great attention to the instructions given by Abbé Domitien and I took notes of them carefully," says Thérèse again. And she adds: "How happy I was to be going to the illustrated Office, just like the nuns." This, as a matter of fact,
The high altar, chapel of the Benedictine Nuns, Lisieux.

was one of the features of the retreat.

One last walk in silence through the monks' garden closed this day of elevation and thanksgiving, the retreatants went up to the dormitory.

The Eve of the Great Day

On the eve of the ceremony, following a tradition proudly kept up among many Catholic families, the parents were invited to come to the parlor, that their children might ask their pardon for any trouble they might have given them. Forgiveness likewise was asked from the assembled Misresses, and Mother Directress gave her beloved children a truly maternal exhortation in such touching terms that sometimes the tears flowed silently. A genuine confession, earnestly prepared for, had been made during the previous two weeks, so that the last days might be spent in peace and joy of soul. Now absolution was received this evening, causing such intense happiness that it sometimes had to be restrained.

The catechism Mistress, Mother St. Francis de Sales, vividly remembers how Thérèse behaved during the retreat. While she was a model of patient silence and recollection, the joy that filled her heart at the approach of Jesus revealed itself in her over-flowing gaiety. We can understand therefore why she exclaimed in her autobiography: "Ah, what a blessed retreat was this! I do not think that such joy could be felt anywhere but in religious houses. As the number of children is small, it is all the easier to give special attention to each one. Yes, I say it with a grateful heart: our Misresses in the Abbey lavished truly maternal care on us. I do not know their reason, but I observed that they watched over me even more attentively than over my companions."

At LENGTH the long-for-day dawned! What a pleasing sight were the First Communion dresses and veils, hanging in the middle of the dormitory. "Live snowflakes," is Thérése's description of them.

The costume is simple and maidenly: a full, plain frock, with a long muslin veil, a wide silk sash, a pretty cap of fine tulle, reminiscent of that worn at Baptism. There is permission to wear one's rosary beads at Mass and at Vespers, one's First Communion medal. No worldly ornament may be worn.

Enter the Chapel

Now let us come into the chapel with our communicants. The shades are lowered: this subdued light, so helpful for recollection, sets off the brightness of the burning candles and of the white dresses. A carpet covers the floor and softens the footsteps. Over the First Communicants' pews are spread white, fringed tapestries of damask. In front of each child a wax candle on a tall silver candlestick is burning. In the center of the nave's choir, the altar for Mary's month, decked out with flowers and foliage, is ablaze with lights. Little white lamps, to the same number as there are communicants, are slowly burning themselves out at the feet of the Blessed Virgin.

The curtains over the grille are drawn apart, and the parents seated near the altar see, with emotion, their beloved children entering the chapel in procession. From all these young hearts arise with touching sweetness, the words of the hymn:

(Oh sainte unité qui enveloppe les âmes) Guèrez invisibles qui êtes là face!
Le mon Dieu, ô l'objet de nos louanges Mon Dieu mon Corps pour la première fois...

This is followed by the solemn strains of the Veni Creator, intoned by the celebrant. The Mass is sung by the choir of nuns. At the offering of the chalice, each holding her candle in her hand, go to make their offering at the grille.

The Misresses of catechism are in charge and everything is held in perfect order without causing any disturbance to the communicants. After the elevation an older pupil sings a touching O Salutaris.

The hallowed moment has come. From the altar Abbé Donis says a few words which complete the immediate preparation by raising the Host of desire and love with which these hearts are already burning. He deduces his text from St. John's Gospel (XVII, 10): "All My things are thine..."

The sacristans open the grille and on the Communion cloths. The silence the priest's voice is heard. "Benedicite Domine..." Donis says.

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Then slowly he comes down the steps of the altar, the communicants come forward, kneel one after the other at the Holy Table and receive for the first time the 'God Who giveth joy to their youth.' Hallooed, ineffable moment, the memory of which will never die but will pervade a lifetime. Oh, how sweet to the soul of Thérèse was this 'first kiss of the Lord!'

As soon as the priest has placed the Sacred Host on the lips of the first child, the choir begins the antiphon of Thanksgiving: 'Quid accessibility Domini...'

**Thanksgiving**

When all have Partaken of the Divine Banquet, the singing finishes and the little hands that were lifted in adoration are raised again. Abbé Dumont repeats his text, applying it now to the gratitude with which his little ones' souls are filled; he urges them to pray for their parents and benefactors, and then the Holy Sacrifice is concluded.

During the thanksgiving, the voice of a former pupil is heard singing:

*Il est à moi, Celui qui le tient attaché
Que l'avoir ne saurait contenir
Il est à moi, je l'embrasser, je lui baiser,
Rien n'est de ce que nous donnons...*

But what does the sweetest music matter when Jesus Himself speaks in the depths of the soul? From the greater number He asks only love and holiness. To some privileged souls He already gives glimpses of the heights of perfection. From the lips of the lucky child herself let us hear what He said to Thérèse:

'It was an embrace of love! I felt that I was loved and I said in return: I love you, and I give myself to you for ever.' Jesus asked nothing of me, He sought no sacrifice. For a long time now He and little Thérèse had not met and understood each other... On this day our meeting could not be called a mere meeting but rather a Food. We were no longer two. Thérèse had disappeared like the drop of water that is swallowed up in the midst of the ocean. Jesus alone remained. He was Master and King.

Had not Thérèse asked Him to take over her liberty from her? This liberty frightened her; she felt herself to be so weak and frail that she wanted to be invited for ever to Divine Strength.

'But her joy was become so great, so deep that she could not hold it in. A torrent of happiness poured down her cheeks, to the great surprise of her companions who kept saying to one another later on: 'Why did she cry? Had she something on her conscience?...' No, it was because she did not love her mother with her, or her sister the Carmelites, of whom she is so fond. And nobody understood that when all the joy of Heaven comes into a heart, this heart—excited, weep, and mortal—cannot endure it without weeping' (The Story of a Soul, chapter IV.)

After the thanksgiving the happy communicants went to the large community parlor to embrace their relatives and friends. The meeting was brief, as this was not a time for long conversation. Thérèse's countenance still bore traces of the deep emotion that she had just experienced. We have evidence of this in the following little incident told by a girl who was related to the Gesuines.

'My mother remarked that the child had been weeping. That poor little girl's eyes are red,' she said to M. Guerin [mother of Thérèse].

'The uncle did not seem surprised. He just replied: 'She has a slight cold,' wishing no doubt to save his dear little Thérèse from embarrassment, for he knew her tender pietry. Afterwards, on reading the Story of a Soul, I readily understood the reason for those tears.'

**Memories of Onlookers**

The following are some reminiscences written by the nuns and older pupils who were present at that memorable First Communion.

"On the day of her First Communion, Thérèse looked more like an angel than a human being. A radiant heavenly serenity was noticeable in her eyes and in her bearing. I observed this every time she received the Blessed Sacrament; her features seemed to reflect the depth of her faith and the love of her love.' These are Mother Prioress' words.

Let us hear the Mistress of Edition again: "To prepare for her First..."
Comtesse Thérèse made acts of virtue over a very long period. She called them "flowers to decorate Jesus' resting-place" and she wanted them to be many and fragrant. Beneath this single, childlike mode of preparation lay genuine, tender love. From this time on, she kept the silence more faithfully than ever and was still more deeply pious.

A novice who was afterwards to be his sister writes: "On the day of her First Communion I took delight in gazing on this angel of plente and innocence. ... After Mass, as I came towards the little communicant, an indescribable feeling of respect overcome me; she seemed to me to be streaming with grace. Putting my arm around her so that our two white veils hung one beside the other, she replied, and the light in her eyes and her tone of voice revealed the immensity of her happiness:"

A Child’s Prayer

Sister Henriette, a lay-Sister who died in 1917, has left us these interesting details.

"It was changed from the school at Ester, 1864, but I was called on to help in the refectory on the First Communion day. This gave me the pleasure of seeing Thérèse more closely. She came to have a habit, so to speak, of checking with one companion. A little girl said to me: ‘If you only knew, Sister, what she asked Our Lord during her thanksgiving…’ To this, Sister I couldn’t tell you, you would be surprised. ‘But Thérèse just looked at them as though she pitted them, without saying anything. Then I answered, saying: ‘You don’t understand, Thérèse; she is such a patient, such a model of love.’ ‘Then she came to me and looked into my eyes. ‘You understand, Sister,’ she said, ‘they don’t!’"

The day was spent in the cells of the monastery. After dinner there was a quiet period of recreation during which the First Communicants gave renewing cards to the Mazenodians and to their companions; then there was a short visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Thus the great event of the morning was kept uppermost in their minds until the time for Vespers, when they made their solemn promises of loyalty to Jesus.

Renewing Baptismal Vows

Half-past two came. The white procession starts for the chapel again. At the foot of the altar a credence table is placed and on it are the crosiers and the book of the Holy Gospels, with candles all around. After Vespers has been sung, a procession is formed. In front is the banner of the Children of Mary; and the youngest pupils feel very proud and happy to be holding the golden streamers of the banner. The vibrant strains of the time-honored hymn are heard: "Oui, non, j’aimerai toujours de vous dire…"

Flinging the grille, the procession proceeds into the sanctuary and the communicants stand before the credence table. One of them pronounces the renewal of baptismal promises, and then her companion, each having her right hand on the sacred book, repeat twice by two the solemn pledge: "I renounce Satan… I give myself to Jesus Christ for ever."

Continuing on its way, the procession goes around the sanctuary and re-enters the enclosed part of the chapel to the chanting of the psalm “In excelsis”; the first verse of which is repeated as a refrain by those present. The children now resume their places to listen to the words of the preacher bidding them on the evening of this great day to throw themselves into the arms of their Heavenly Mother.

Consecration to Mary

Once more the procession is formed: this time—while the older pupils sing a hymn to Our Lady—the First Communicants are ranged together in a half-circle at the feet of the Mother of God.

All kneeling and the childlike voices begin a tender, benedictory hymn. At its close the girl appeared to recite the act of Consecration to the Blessed Virgin and goes to kneel close to the altar of the altar. When there is an orphan among the communicants, this honor is always reserved for her. Accordingly, this year it was Thérèse Martin (because her mother was dead)… and with what sentiments of truth, glad priests see recited this act in the name of her companions. Once more let us open the Story of a Soul: "I put my whole heart into my consecration to the Blessed Virgin and into my prayer that she might watch over me. I think that she looked down with love on her little flower and smiled once more upon her. I recalled her visible smile that had previously healed and saved me; I well knew what I owed to her. Had she herself, on the morning of this eighth of May, placed within her soul her Jesus, ‘the Flower of the fields, and the Lily of the valleys’?"

Deeply moved and stirred, these present listen to the Act of Consecration. The scene is a beautiful one and it touches the spectators to tears.

After another hymn the First Communicants go back to their places for solemn Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, which closes this heavenly day.

The children then rejina their families; the rejoicings of the home circle must have their turn.

Thérèse has written: "I was not in different to the family feast that was prepared at Les Buissonnets. My happiness, however, was peaceful; nothing could disturb my Interior joy. How could the fragile dress and the presents captivate her young heart? No, this heart of hers had found too much joy in Jesus to take pleasure in earthly satisfactions. It langued for the day of the eternal Communion, of ‘the exalted Council of the true home, the day that will know no decline.’"

Mass of Thanksgiving

The First Communicants were to return in the evening to the Abbey in order to be present on the following morning at the Mass of Thanksgiving, which was always early. Thérèse, by special permission, did not return that evening but she was there in good time the next morning.

After the Mass of Thanksgiving the chaplain gave a short discourse, the theme of which was always gratitude and perseverance. Afterwards he received the children and their friends who thanked him for the devoted care with which he had prepared this young souls for the first visit of Our Lord. At this time he gave out the First Communion certificates and souvenir picture.

The children were permitted to spend several days at home. Each family was happy to have its First Communicant, whose presence after each great grace, would draw upon the home the blessing of Heaven and would diffuse the saving influence of Jesus.

A COMMEMORATIVE pilgrimage was set at the exact place where on May 8, 1864, the Communion of Jesus and little Thérèse Martin took place.

Among the glories of the Abbey rest this one of the greatest and most durable—the possession of this first holy place where the first communion between Jesus and the greatest of modern times fell, a memorial that will give spiritual life to that day’s influence all over the world."