

## CATERINA ZECCHINI (1877-1948)

**M**other Caterina Zecchini was born in Venice, Italy on May 24, 1877, and died there on October 17, 1948. We have scant information about her youth: baptized on June 3, 1878, in the church of St. Giacomo dell'Orto, she was confirmed at the church of Saints Geremia and Lucia on May 25, 1885. Known to be very sensitive, yet she possessed an exuberant, lively, and witty character. When she was ten years old, after completing elementary school, Caterina began working at home helping her father, a wine merchant, with his accounting. She developed an ever growing concern for the poor, especially for children of her parish whom she met on the streets and whom she often brought to her home to give them food and clothing.

This charity that grew in her heart was destined, through the grace of God, to grow in time until she could no longer limit herself to helping the occasional poor person. She felt the need to work with all her strength for the spread of the Kingdom of God throughout the world by serving those whom Caterina called the true poor: those who did not yet know God. In 1905, Caterina had an encounter with the Dominican Fr. Giocondo Pio Lorgna, which was a fundamental moment in her spiritual life. For over twenty-five years, until his death, he was her spiritual director, helping her to grow in her love for the cross and the Eucharist.

Caterina experienced the Eucharistic encounter as a meeting with a real person – with God, whom she called “annihilated and hidden”, but whom she knew to be the only one with the power to transform a person’s life. After receiving the Eucharist, she grew in an ever stronger desire for per-

fection and for union with God. While Eucharistic contemplation led her to an authentic knowledge of herself and her own nothingness, it also gave her the strength to spread her wings and cast her gaze farther away, where many sisters and brothers needed her help.

Her communion with Christ generated a call to mission, which manifested itself in the presence of deep sentiments of love, in what she experienced as Christ's thirst for souls. She wrote, "I felt a great thirst for souls.... Give me, Jesus, many of these souls, I want to bring them back to your feet, beautiful and purified" (September 16, 1912). Contemplating Christ in his passion, under the Crucifix and in the Eucharistic presence, sharing the anxiety of love, Caterina longed to satisfy this thirst in the way that Christ himself had chosen: through suffering. Thus, was born the desire to offer herself with Christ and in Christ as a victim for her brothers and sisters. On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Catherine offered herself to the Lord's Merciful Love; an act that was a synthesis of her journey, of her many desires and intuitions that came together into one great ideal: "I feel immense desires in me. I would like to be an apostle of your love, O great God! To die as a martyr of charity, to spend every moment of my life to make that Love known, for the Glory of God and for the good of souls."

In the light of the Eucharist, we can understand the various missionary activities Caterina undertook. One was the publication in 1915 of what she entitled the "Apostolic Page", which called for a monthly day of prayer and of offering one's daily toils for the missions, for missionary vocations, for the spiritual and material needs of missionaries, and the conversion of those who still do not know Christ. Another was an Hour of Adoration, to which she invited people to pray for the missions around the world before the Eucharistic Christ. A third was the St. Catherine of Siena Missionary Union, a group of women, bound by private vows, who met monthly to offer a few hours of work for the missions and adoration for the same purpose, accompanied by a priest who would lead them on a journey of missionary formation.

The double movement of work and adoration also marked another initiative by Caterina, the missionary laboratory, which later became the diocesan missionary laboratory. She would say that “only prayer and work would have had the efficacy of realizing the goal that Zecchini proposed to the faithful for the non-believers.” Finally, she organized the Institution of the Little Apostles of the Holy Childhood and an amateur theater company. The proceeds of the recitals were offered for the missions.

Caterina’s experience of offering herself as a “victim,” along with her ever deepening thirst for prayer and progressive emptying of herself before God were clear signs of a vocation that could no longer be limited to one person. It blossomed into a new religious institute. The intuition for this work came to her, once again, before the Eucharistic Jesus.

The idea of forming a religious community came to her at Castel di Godego in 1912. It would be a community completely devoted to the universal mission of the Church. But it would take many years of reflection and discernment, as well as a journey of faith and a careful search for the will of God with the help of some priests, before the idea would become reality.

In October of 1918, Caterina was forced to take refuge in Novara because of the ravages of war. There, in Santa Maria delle Grazie church she met Fr. Luigi Fizzotti, a Passionist priest, who heard her confession. Even though she did not reveal much about her plans, she was urged by her confessor to begin the work of organizing the new institute without delay because it was the work of God. Fr. Luigi always remained close to Caterina, supporting her in her role as foundress, helping her make her way through letters and recommendations and when it came to giving an institutional face to the work, he was its principle sponsor.

Caterina then asked the Cardinal Patriarch of Venice, Pietro La Fontaine, to bless the work she had begun, which by now included a number of companions that had joined her spiritually. On November 10, 1922, the Cardinal signed a decree establishing a Pious Union, but it was only

on May 30, 1923, that Caterina Zecchini and her first two companions entered the first cenacle of community life. On the very next day, the Feast of Corpus Christi, they formally consecrated themselves to God in the presence of Fr. Lorgna. This first stage of the community lasted from 1923 to 1933 an involved intense engagement of prayer and sacrifice, before the community would be officially recognized by the Church.

On April 10, 1933, after various difficulties, delays, and obstacles of all kinds, the Constitutions and Rules of the *Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Sacrament* were approved. “It was given a yes,” reads the diary of the Patriarch, who wanted the decree to be dated on Good Friday. This date is certainly appropriate because – the decree reads – “we are now in the nineteen hundredth centenary of the Redemption. It is the day when the Lord shed his blood for the human race. And the new congregation, aside from that which is common to all religious institutes, calls on its daughters to work among the faithful for the non-believers, helping Catholic Missions with spiritual and material works, which relates very well with the purposes of Redemption itself.” For Caterina and her companions, it was an early Easter.

She herself had expressed it thus in the first Rule of 1923: “A work that is fully imbued with an apostolic and Eucharistic spirit, which has the mission of gathering into the heart of Christ the souls of the poor non-believers and thus increasing the number of those who worship him.” As a cornerstone for her institute, Caterina insisted upon love for the Church, particularly in its maternal and missionary nature. Therefore, this work had to possess a general apostolic character as its primary quality (Rule of 1923): “All missions without exception will have the suffrage of our prayers, sacrifices, offerings.”

Universal missionary contemplation lived in this way produced a definite choice in Caterina. “We want to exercise our mission here among the faithful, for the benefit of the non-believers. We seek, therefore, with the help of the Lord, to strive most earnestly for the spiritual and material good

of Catholic missions and to spread the missionary idea in every class of people” (to Patriarch Pietro La Fontaine, July 25, 1922). Caterina’s life and spirituality found strength and meaning in the Eucharist, the very source of the life of the whole Church and her mission.

Caterina knew that the ideal that motivated her was realizable only through suffering. She never refused the cross, even when in the last years of her life it came to visit her in the form of a painful illness and a series of misunderstandings. Still she found strength and courage before the tabernacle, praying at length, even at night, to ask for graces for the institute and for the extension of the kingdom of God throughout the earth. After a life completely dedicated to the Eucharistic-missionary ideal, her death, which occurred on October 17, 1948, fulfilled what she had written many years before in the institute’s Rule: “At the end of our mortal life, the last note of the love that our poor heart will emit will be that of the dying Christ: ‘Consummatum est, – It is accomplished!’”

Baptised  
and sent

October  
2019