

St. Gemma Galgani

Born: 1878

Entered eternal life: April 11, 1903

Feast day: April 11

Reflection:

Many saints can be difficult to relate to, their lives seem so foreign to our own and their striving for virtue seems so beyond our own ability and even common experience that it seems farcical to even attempt to follow their example. How could you follow the example of a mystic who from the time she was a small child had a singular and almost perfect focus on heaven? In many ways saints like St. Gemma can lead us to discouragement, they seem to have reached sanctity so easily, and even though St. Gemma suffered greatly; she never wavered from the path she trod.

However, the irony is that St. Gemma herself would not have claimed that she did anything remarkable, she would attribute all the heights she reached not to herself but to God, and the higher she reached the more she would attribute those perfections to God. Now we are then again tempted to say that this is simply pious humility, that of course St. Gemma would say that and diminish herself, that's just what holy people do. But that's not what humility is. Humility is a recognition of one's place in the order of creation, primarily with respect to the Creator. As one grows closer to the source of all wisdom they become wiser; they don't grow in self-deception they grow in clarity of sight towards the true nature of things. When those who are holy debase themselves they are not doing it because that's just what holy people do, they do it because they see the reality of things more clearly than we do. Although there is a focus on the intense and bizarre things mystics often do, that is not the important part of their lives, rather it's what is being done to them that is far in a way more important. St. Gemma simply allowed the graces she had been given to carry her rather than trying to go anywhere under her own power, she recognized that we are passive recipients of God's grace and while we can choose to accept or reject that grace if we accept it the good that comes from it is still from God and not from us.

We can fool ourselves into thinking that if we just put down our heads and try hard enough we

can reach heaven, we can see the great penances that St. Gemma took on and think that that is the path to holiness, that if we just do enough we can imitate these saints and reach perfection.

But penances are not there to make us love but are themselves a response to love, you don't suffer for the sake of something you don't love but for the sake of something you do love, penance and prayer are a response to something, now they are for the sake of deepening our love but we first have to encounter the love of Christ before we can respond to it. St. Gemma's life, like all the lives of the saints, was a life lived in response to the love that was first shown to her, and her response was simply to accept the love on offer and follow where the Lover led her.