

In that Sacrament we are enabled to receive wise advice from the priest of God, whilst our souls are washed clean in preparation for receiving the Sacrament of love, wherein we also receive Wisdom and every other good gift of God, for we receive Jesus himself.

Let us then pray, especially returning as the Church does, to the ever-repeated *Confiteor*, and make reparation for the manifold abuses of the intellect. Let us fulfil our Lady's injunction to do penance, compassionate her in her seven sorrows and join our tears to hers at La Salette as she sorrows over sin and the martyrdom of Christians, the crucifixion of the mystical body of her Son. Let us pray that she will bring the light of her Son's life to sinners so that they, and we among them, may confess and repent of our sins and may thus be worthy to be the vessels in which the light of God's truth may shine before men in good works.

'Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses.' So Jesus taught us to pray, because the very effect of a communion truly received is to take away the guilt of venial sin for which we are sincerely sorry. Even in the Sacrament of Love, his wisdom is over all and we can say, emptying ourselves and making room entirely for God, '*Confiteor, quia peccavi. . .*' He alone understands. He alone is the true food of the mind. He alone is the Wisdom which reaches from end to end mightily and disposes all things sweetly.

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## OUR LADY OF THE OAK TREE

BY

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**S**UCH customs as that of fixing plaques or statues of our Lady on oak-trees, or of giving these shrines titles of 'Our Lady of the Oak', were both widespread and ancient. There was a famous Virgin of the Oak in Norwich and, according to tradition, our Lady of Penrhys, burned at Chelsea with our Lady of Willesden and our Lady of Walsingham, was found by shepherds hanging on the trunk of an oak on the summit of a mountain at the head of the Rhondda Valley. There is reason, too, to suppose that our Lady of Willesden may have been yet another instance of what was originally an oak-tree sanctuary.

By far the most important shrine, however, of this particular cultus of our Lady still survives in Central Italy, in the Shrine of St Maria della Quercia (Oak-tree), just outside the Porta Santa Lucia at Viterbo, on the road to Bagnaia. Whatever may be the history of

the origins of Penrhys or Willesden, there is in this instance certainly no claim to any miraculous origin.

A local farmer named Battista Juzzante undertook to develop a fine vineyard in an area which had once been a dense oak forest, and which was known then as the Campo Grazzano.

In 1417, Juzzante decided to set up a small shrine of our Lady on a certain large oak close to the highway; partly as an aid to the devotion of his workers, partly to gain the prayers of passers-by for the protection of his vineyard against disease or inclement weather. He employed a contemporary artist, Maestro Martello, ('Il Monetto') to paint a beautiful image on a tile which was affixed to the tree selected.

For some years this little shrine, typical of so many in the same province, attracted no special attention. By degrees, however, it was observed that the tree was putting out thick foliage as if to enframe the tile, that neither sun nor rain had any ill effect upon its colouring, and that in some mysterious way, no force of wind or tempest could succeed in blowing it down.

Two or three years later, a nearby hermit, Pier Domenico Alberti, began to visit the tree almost daily, to pray there. It is related that one day, to save himself future journeys, he removed the tile to his hermitage on Monte St Angelo, only to find, the next morning, that during the night it had been taken back to the oak-tree shrine.

Likewise a devout woman of Viterbo, named Bartolomea, essayed to take the picture to her home; but thinking that a similar overnight restoration had been a trick played upon her, she bore it home a second time and locked it in a chest. Next day she was astonished to find the box empty and the tile hanging as usual on the tree.

Thus a strong local devotion seems to have grown up, focused upon this particular shrine. In July, 1467, the miseries which affected Viterbo from the strife of civil wars were further increased by an epidemic of the plague. The coincidence, on July 8th, of the preservation from attack of a local citizen after invocation to our Lady of the Oak, led the townsfolk solemnly to beg her intercession against the pestilence, which ceased forthwith, before the end of the month.

In gratitude, great crowds, thousands strong, poured from Viterbo to offer thanks and, on the first Sunday in August, the Bishop with all the clergy and the magnates of Viterbo went thither in solemn procession and Mass was sung at an altar in the shade of the oak-tree.

The hermit, Pier Domenico, then began to preach a crusade of prayer in connection with this new devotion, and in particular in Siena where he besought the people, terrified by a series of earthquakes which threatened to ruin their city, to turn to La Quercia for

aid. This they did and, a few months later, they brought a silver plaque, engraved with a view of Siena, in gratitude to our Lady. The story of this episode is still preserved by an oil-painting in the Municipal Hall of Viterbo, which bears a commemorative inscription written within a few weeks of the earthquakes.

It was not long before the entire tree was hung with votive offerings from a wide area. Before the end of the year a chapel was built nearby, which the Dominican, Franciscan, Augustinian and Servite Friars of Viterbo served in turn, for the provision of Masses and the hearing of confessions, which were abundant.

But this arrangement did not work smoothly and the next year the Bishop appointed a colony of *Gesuati*, then recently founded by St John Colombini, to serve the new pilgrimage centre. So heavy was the work, however, that this community was forced to relinquish it and a council of the city authorities was called to determine their successors.

This inclusion of the laity by the Bishop, and the selection by a lay committee of the Order to serve as custodians of the shrine, is of much interest, showing something of the extent to which the Church did in those days use the services of the laity, and also the pride of possession which the city felt in its new sanctuary.

The story is told that the committee expressed a preference for the Dominicans, but as the Black Friars already had one house in the city, objections were raised. It was, therefore, agreed to watch the road from Florence to Viterbo, on a fixed date, at the Porta Santa Lucia, and to choose the Order of whatever religious might first come into sight. Hardly had the elders taken their places when three figures appeared, those of Father Martial Auribelli, Master General of the Dominicans, with two companions.

Thus the care of the shrine was entrusted to the Order of Preachers and a Bull was obtained from Paul II, granting faculties for the erection of a new church and friary. To this church and monastery was added a charming cloister designed by Bramante, a large hospice for pilgrims and another for merchants foregathered for two important annual fairs, granted by charter in honour of the sanctuary. A special road was built out to it from Viterbo, lined with trees. Fountains and even an aqueduct for the benefit of friars and pilgrims were built at public expense and the rough Campo Grazzano became the flourishing suburb which it still is.

Under Dominican guardianship, this new centre of devotion flourished. Numerous were the saints who visited it, including St Philip Neri, St Camillus of Lellis, and St Paul of the Cross. The Popes vied with one another in their bestowal of favours. Paul III

made an annual pilgrimage, saying Mass at the Lady Altar. He it was who instituted the Papal Order of Knighthood, of the Lily, under the Patronage of the Madonna della Quercia, whose picture appeared on one side of the medal worn by the knights.

St Pius V., himself a Dominican, was second to none in his devotion and he attached many occasions for gaining indulgences to the shrine. Indeed it was hither that he despatched commands for the Friars to make special and urgent intercession at the time of the Battle of Lepanto. A large number of those who hung up votive offerings during the next decade were grateful survivors from the battle; some of their offerings have been spared to this day.

The history of the miracles and graces obtained at the sanctuary fill a large volume. It would be impossible to attempt even a survey of them in an article such as this. Undoubtedly many favours were received by our Lady's clients at this particular shrine. The walls of the cloisters are covered with paintings depicting the circumstances of many of them and every nook and corner of the church has been filled with ex-voto tablets, statues and other grateful offerings.

Nor is the history of this sanctuary restricted to the medieval past. Here it was that Père Henri Lacordaire and his first companions passed the year of their noviciate, and it was before this shrine that they chose our Lady of the Oak to be patroness of their endeavour by which the Dominican Order was restored to France.

One of these companions was, of course, Père Hyacinth Besson who, being an artist before he became a friar, made a copy of the Virgin of the Tile. It was this that was solemnly enshrined in their chapel at Nancy, the first house of the restored French province.

The most illustrious orator of his time, whose burning words, preached from the pulpit of Notre-Dame, convinced an unbelieving Paris, Père Lacordaire did not hesitate to acknowledge the Madonna della Quercia. Preaching there one day, he exclaimed: 'Look around! See this church with its buildings and cloisters. Ask yourselves, Who built them? Who brought all these fields into cultivation? Who built the road that leads to Viterbo? Who founded the annual fairs? Who draws here, year by year, such millions of pilgrims? Ask yourselves these questions and I will answer them. It is *that piece of tile* there that has done all this. May our copy (that made by Père Hyacinth) do as much good for us as this original'.

And it was before that 'piece of tile' that he and his companions made their vows; a fact which he always regarded with lively satisfaction, that the new French Province was thus solemnly consecrated, like France herself, to our blessed Lady.

The present appearance of the picture on that tile is as unchanged today as it was then, and as it was when first the Dominicans enshrined it in the new church.

The picture represents the half-figure of our Lady in a red robe, with a sky-blue cloak. In her left arm she carries the Holy Child, in a yellow-coloured tunic, who holds a small bird in his right hand and stretches out towards his Mother with the other.

Twice crowned by papal indult, honoured with a Mass and in the Divine Office each year throughout the Diocese of Viterbo, our Lady of the Oak is enshrined, still hanging upon the trunk of the ancient oak-tree, in a charming little marble house or temple inside the larger church, behind the high altar which it serves as an altar-piece. This *tempietto* was designed by Andrea Bregno, in an ornate Sienese style. It is further adorned on the two sides and on the back, facing the apsidal choir, with frescoes by Ghirlandaio. The western side, or front, which exhibits the tile, is a marvellous confection of saints and angels. The actual altar-piece is a vivid, early renaissance scene of the Annunciation. But none of it can dim the beauty or offset the charm of the exquisite painting on the tile itself. No other celebrated figure of our Lady can excel this in delicate beauty.

The shrine of our Lady of the Oak remains, still a popular place of pilgrimage. Not even the immense popularity of our Lady of Good Counsel, not a hundred miles away, ever offset that; though today, perhaps, in current Italian devotion, precedence must be given to the shrines of our Lady of Divine Love and of Pompei. The old friary buildings, alas, house the friars no more. They were dislodged only in the troubles of the last century and never regained their home. This is to be regretted even though the buildings serve a useful purpose as a Diocesan Seminary. But the devotion to our Lady of the Oak at Viterbo still goes on and nothing can efface the memory of the four hundred happy years of Dominican guardianship.