



A LIFE OF SISTER ANNELLA ZERVAS, O.S.B.

TICKET *for* ETERNITY

BY JAMES KRITZECK

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A LIFE OF SISTER ANNELLA ZERVAS, O.S.B.

for TICKET ETERNITY

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FOREWORD

I meet many people in various situations who have been deeply inspired by Sister Annella Zervas, O.S.B. Many are moved by her simple life of courageous suffering. Most of these people heard her story from the book you now hold in your hands, *Ticket for Eternity*. This is how I heard of her story. My sister shared this book with me many years ago, not knowing that one day I would become the Bishop of Crookston and be responsible for investigating Sister Annella's cause.

I do not know if its author, James Kritzeck, fully realized the extraordinary gift he was giving the Church when he produced *Ticket for Eternity* during his final year of undergraduate studies at Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota. This book has opened the eyes of the faithful—my own included—to the life of a young Benedictine who was born and raised in Moorhead, Minnesota, in the Diocese of Crookston. Sister Annella Zervas could become the first recognized saint from Minnesota. She lived an ordinary life with extraordinary faith where she tried to say “yes” to God, even in suffering.

As you will read in the following pages, the themes of Sister Annella's life are numerous, and the lessons she teaches are both simple and life-changing. Everything she did was for Jesus. She played her music for Jesus. She embraced her vocation for Jesus. She suffered

for Jesus. Her obedience and love for her parents and family were offered to Jesus. She reminds us that God grants us very special favors, and in return, we must try to say "yes" to him with all our hearts. She understood that God's ways are not our ways, and she taught the beauty of surrendering to His will. She never asked to be relieved of her suffering, only for the strength to bear it. Her greatest daily consolation was Jesus in the Eucharist. She could never have endured what she did without the companionship of her friend and bridegroom.

Sister Annella teaches us that there is always hope, no matter what our circumstances or difficulties. She refused to be discouraged. She had no wish other than to live as God willed. Knowing that her pain could become unbearable, she would entrust her suffering to Mary ahead of time, asking her to offer it to Jesus on her behalf.

We know of this incredible life because of *this book you are holding*. Many of us received a prior printing of this book from the efforts of Patrick Norton and his wife, Sandy, their children, and their supporters. We owe them so much gratitude for their courage, perseverance, and sacrifice to share the story of Sister Annella.

When someone says "yes" to God like Sister Annella did, it has a profound impact on the world. Perhaps it was her deep desire to say "yes" to all that God would ask of her, that made her pray especially for others to be able to do the same. She prayed fervently that no one would miss their vocation. She knew that this was the secret to happiness in this life, finding God's will and doing it. Through your reading we hope you, too, will want to say yes to whatever God asks of you in your life.

The process to study the life of Sister Annella for the possibility of canonization is underway. I invite you to pray for this process, that God's will may be made known. To accompany us all in prayer for this great effort, the Sister Annella Guild has prepared prayer resources, including the official prayer for the canonization, a Novena to St. Benedict, and a Litany of Suffering. These can be found in this book as well as online at sisterannella.org.

Thank God for the life and example of Sister Annella. May we all live for Jesus.

*The Most Reverend Andrew H. Cozzens, S.T.D., D.D.,
Bishop of Crookston, Minnesota
August 14, 2025*



PRAYER

To Obtain the Canonization of the Servant of God Sister Annella Zervas, O.S.B.

O Heavenly Father, who art the Author of all virtue and Source of all holiness, and who, through Thy faithful servant, Sister Annella Zervas, hast been pleased to give the world an example of patience and obedient resignation under suffering, we pray Thee to grant us the grace which we ask through her mediation, and thus to manifest her sanctity, that Thy Holy Church may soon be able to proclaim it for Thy greater glory, O God, and for the glorification of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, whom Sister Annella loved so fervently. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father
(three times).
Amen.

Lord Jesus, glorify Thy Spouse,
Sister Annella Zervas, O.S.B.
We beg of Thee by Thy Holy Cross.
Amen.

TICKET FOR ETERNITY

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Mariae Carmeli Decorì

In obedience to the decrees of Pope Urban VIII of March 3, 1625 and June 16, 1631, to the Apostolic Constitution *Officiorum ac munera* of Pope Leo XIII, and to similar legislation of other Supreme Pontiffs, I wish to declare that the facts presented on the following pages depend for their credibility on no more than human authority, and further, that certain words used to describe virtues and events are not employed in their canonical senses, nor in anticipation of a judgment by the Church through the Supreme Pontiff, to whose authority in these matters I submit without reservation.

I wish also to record my deep gratitude to members of the Zervas family and of the religious community of the Convent of St. Benedict, and to the Rev. Joseph Kreuter, O.S.B., and the Rev. Alphonse Breault, O.M.I., for placing at my disposal, when I was little more than a child, the valuable materials from which these chapters were not long afterwards written.

James Kritzeck
Princeton University



*"With the grace of God,
I am determined to become a saint!"*

SISTER ANNELLA

SUPPORT THE CAUSE

Sister Annella Zervas, OSB, was born, raised, and died in Moorhead, Minnesota, living a simple, ordinary life with extraordinary faith. Close to Jesus throughout her 26 years, her intimacy and reliance on Him deepened as she endured intense suffering in her final years. Her life touches the heart of our Catholic faith, showing us that when suffering is united with Christ, it becomes a path to holiness, redemption, and intimacy with God. If her story inspires you, we invite you to pray for her canonization and join the Sister Annella Guild.

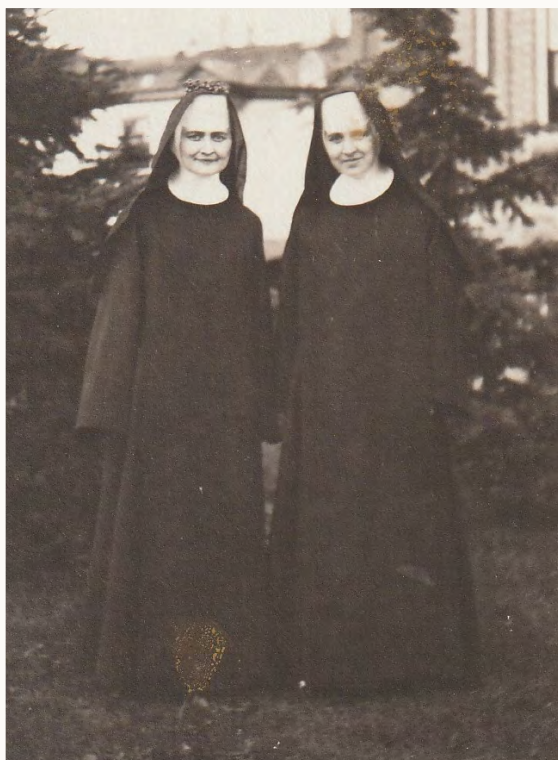
JOIN THE GUILD

The Sister Annella Guild is dedicated to sharing Sister Annella's story and supporting her cause for canonization. By joining, you help spread what Sister Annella teaches us about Christ, the value of suffering, and the beauty of living our Catholic faith with courage and trust in God. Membership also connects you to a growing community with updates, opportunities, and events dedicated to advancing her cause. Your prayers and financial support provide the resources needed to present her life to the Holy See for consideration of her sanctity.



To learn more or to join, visit:
sisterannella.org

TICKET FOR ETERNITY



PROLOGUE

The beginning of the year 1891 has no claim to have been, for either of St. Augustine's Cities, a particularly dramatic one. Victoria, who had already given her name to the times, had ruled the United Kingdom for more than half a century. Bismarck had resigned as Chancellor of the German Empire. The Triple Alliance appeared to guarantee what was termed, with some reason, the balance of power in Europe. The President of the United States, Benjamin Harrison, was following the progress of a civil war in Chile. Many thoughtful persons were concerned about the awakening energies of Asia and Africa.

In the Vatican, octogenarian Pope Leo XIII, whose vigorous pontificate was still far from over, was in the process of writing his never-to-be-forgotten encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Many mourned the recent death of John Henry Newman. Very few were aware that a young nun of the Carmel of Lisieux, Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus, had just pronounced her profession of vows.

Drama had passed, too, from a valley far removed from all of these events, the Red River Valley of Minnesota, North Dakota, and Manitoba. Once the scene of a nervous trade rivalry between Britain and France, it had turned, with the expulsion of the Sioux Indians and the coming of the Northern Pacific Railway, to quiet growth and

prosperity. On the Red River's east bank, a city called Moorhead was founded as a center for transshipping between the river and Lake Superior; that city's success was to come less from this function, however, than from the attraction for waves of new immigrants of the valley's rich farmlands. The immigrants, heirs in this respect to long-dead Vikings and martyred French Jesuits, assured in that area the permanent establishment of the Church.

Thus it was that the most dramatic act possible in this world, the Sacrifice of the Mass, would be celebrated in Moorhead on January 27, 1891, by a monk of St. John's Abbey, Augustine Brockmeyer, and at this Mass Marie Emma Levitre and Hubert Henry Zervas could be joined in the sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

Marie Emma Levitre, seventh of a family of thirteen, was born on April 10, 1868, at Saint-Théodore d'Acton, in the diocese of Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec, and was baptized two days later. Through her parents, Philomène Breault and Pierre Levitre, she fell heir to a long and notable French-Canadian background.

A Breault from France, Vincent, was settled at Port-Royal in Acadie (the present Halifax, Nova Scotia), as early as 1650. In 1755, when many thousands of Acadians were dispersed by order of Charles Lawrence, the Governor of Nova Scotia, part of the Breault family moved to the province of Québec. Jean-Baptiste Breault (also 'Bro'), born in 1742 in Acadie, was the second priest ordained in Canada, and the first to exercise his ministry there¹. From 1772 to 1799 he labored among the Acadians who had settled in New England, and endeavored to re-establish them in Canada; some settled on concessions made by the Sulpicians on the isle of Montreal, some in L'Acadie, Québec, and others in Saint Jacques l'Achigan, Québec, where Father Breault remained as pastor from 1796 to 1814, and where he died in 1824. Philomène Breault, daughter of

Marguerite L'Heureux and Joseph Breault, was born at Saint-Simon in 1838, and married Pierre Levitre in the same city in 1856.

The Levitres were descendants of one of the founders of the parish of Saint-Aimé, canonically erected in 1836, in the county of Richelieu, Québec. Members of the family settled on the rich land of Yamaska at the mouth of the Richelieu River. Pierre Levitre, who married Philomène Breault, was born at Saint-Simon in 1828. After his marriage, his family lived on a farm at Saint-Théodore d'Acton for fourteen years. Then they came to the United States, settling first in Hooksett, New Hampshire, and moving, in 1870, to Northampton, Massachusetts. Later they moved to Felton and Borup, Minnesota, and then to Viding, in Clay county Minnesota. Two of their thirteen children died in infancy. Emma, who married Hubert Zervas, stayed for some time in an Ursuline Convent, now dissolved, in Grand Forks, North Dakota, where she lived the regulated life of the religious community; she was about fifteen at this time, and had secured this position through an elder sister who was living in Minot. Later she went to keep house for her brother Frederick Levitre in Moorhead, where she met and married Hubert Zervas.

Emma Levire Zervas was an able, devout woman. "It was her constant endeavor to do good," her husband wrote of her, a characterization at once so accurate and succinct that it is not easy to elaborate upon it. Although her health was delicate and she was constantly occupied with household duties, she attended Mass and received Holy Communion daily. She possessed a special devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Mother of God. Her reverence for the priesthood and the religious state was so impressive that all who knew her mentioned it. She participated with great joy and zeal in parochial activities; she was the president of the Christian Mothers Confraternity in her parish for thirteen years.

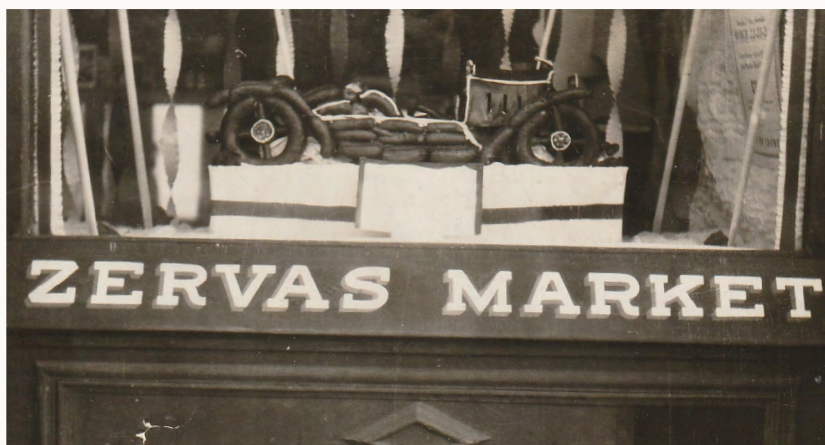
Hubert Henry Zervas was born just six days before his wife, on April 4, 1868, at Immekeppel near Cologne, in the Rhineland of Germany. He was the son of Julianna Kippels and Reiner Hubert Zervas, a soldier. Although the cognomen Zervas is probably of Greek origin², the family appears to have been settled in the Rhineland for many generations. Reiner Zervas had been at Amiens during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71; he was the father of eleven children. Hubert received an unusually complete education from a Catholic teacher in Immekeppel; he became an accomplished penman in three scripts, and developed an intense enthusiasm for reading. One of his favorite books was *The Glories of Divine Grace* by Joseph Scheeben, a professor in the Archiepiscopal Seminary of Cologne³.

In the latter part of April, 1887, Hubert sailed for the United States on the North German Lloyd steamer "Elbe," arriving in New York after a nine-day voyage. He worked as a butcher in St. Paul, Minnesota, from May, 1887, to March, 1889, when he moved to Moorhead; there he secured a position in a market, and later started his own market. He found a good friend in Frederick Levitre, the barber; after multiplying his visits to the barber, he was permitted to meet Emma, Frederick's sister, whom he married in 1891.

Piety was the most central trait of Hubert Zervas; a masculine piety not intolerant but rigorous, a piety imparted by his parents and teacher in youth, and nourished in young manhood half a world away. Like his wife, he was in the habit of attending Mass and receiving Holy Communion daily. A "Guide for Meditation" and other spiritual notes found among his papers testify to the remarkable depth of his interior life. His love for the liturgy of the Church was absolutely extraordinary for a man of his time and position; he used a *Missale Romanum* regularly, and was familiar with portions of the Divine Office. He had a splendid voice and a great love for

music; he learned to sing Gregorian chant, and was choir-director of his parish for forty years.

The marriage of Emma Levitre and Hubert Zervas was, then, a meeting of two eminent strains of Catholicism as well as of two exceptional human beings. The celebrant of their Nuptial Mass must have felt that the prayers of the liturgy of that Mass would be answered in an exemplary family, for he gave each of them a small book of prayers on the occasion, inscribing on the fly-leaf of one, "May Christ be the Sun of your lives." But neither he nor anyone else could have known at that time the extent to which one child of their family, the subject of this study, would be graced by God.





CHAPTER ONE

1900-1915

1

A girl was born to Emma and Hubert Zervas on Palm Sunday, April 7, 1900. Eight days later, on Easter Monday, she was baptized Anna Cordelia, in St. Joseph's Church, by the monk who had married her parents; a granduncle, Bruno Kippels, and an aunt, Cordelia Levitre, were her godparents.

Anna was not the only, nor the first, child born to the couple. Mary, the first child, was born in 1897; Hubert in 1902; Emma in 1904; Raymond Ignatius, who lived only nine days, in 1908; and Cecilia in 1909. Another boy, John, born in 1895, had been adopted earlier by the Zervas family.

Nothing save the fact that she was small and delicate called attention to little Anna within the family circle. She was, it is true, strikingly beautiful, with extraordinarily large and luminous eyes of bright blue and a skin so soft and clear that a complete stranger once remarked to Mrs. Zervas, "It looks as if it were transparent!"

Anna showed a keen musical perception at a very early age. She liked to sing, and at two years of age was taught a song beginning, "Three little owls sitting in a barn..." in which the word "barn" was

pronounced bisyllabically for the sake of rhythm. When informed that the proper pronunciation of this particular word was "barn" and not "bar-ren," she protested, with more conviction than grammar; "But it don't fit that way!"

She was not without childish curiosity. Her mother found her one day standing on a bedroom table looking at a crucifix. Upon being told that she must not play with a crucifix, Anna asked what it was used for. Her mother carefully explained to her that it represented the crucifixion of Christ, Who died for Anna and everyone, and that had He not offered Himself in this way Anna would not have been able to go to heaven. She listened wide-eyed to the explanation, then clapped her hands and exclaimed, "Did He do that? Well, wasn't He a dandy!"

Because Anna was an agreeable child and required very little attention, she was sometimes overlooked in the needs of caring for a large family and entertaining visitors. Once when, through an oversight, she had not been given breakfast, and sat quietly on the stairway until late in the morning, her mother asked her why she was not out playing; she replied softly, "When I don't get my doughnut, I don't feel good." She was fond of play, and took part in games with her sisters and friends.

It was noticed, however, that she was somewhat more serious than the other children, and did not hesitate to tell her mother if they were doing anything which seemed improper to her. Fearing that this trait might become an unpleasant one, her mother once reproached her for it, but Anna replied, "Mamma, if I don't tell you, God will punish me for it. It is my duty to tell you." She was unusually considerate of her parents, and once advised her sister to suck her thumb when she was thirsty so as not to have to trouble her mother.

Following the example of her parents, Anna was devout in prayer. She liked to kneel without support in a corner and recite the Our Father. One day she was found picking up small bits of paper on the lawn and examining them closely. When questioned about this strange activity, she explained that she was looking to see if the name of Jesus was written on them, as she did not want His name subjected to profanation.

2

Anna attended St. Joseph's School in Moorhead, founded in 1880 by the Benedictine Sisters of St. Benedict's Convent, St. Joseph, Minnesota,¹ from 1906 to 1914. Her teachers remembered her neat appearance and erect bearing. She was a conscientious, superior student, who did unusually well in catechism and in Bible and Church history courses. A schoolmate recalled the following incident: "Father [Charles Cannon, O.S.B.²] asked us questions from the Bible history and catechism which had not been our lesson. None of us could answer the questions but Anna. Father was pleased, and said, 'Anna, I can always rely on you. You have not found what you have told me in your Bible history, but you read the Bible with understanding and then express the stories in your own words.'"

This same conscientiousness, however, especially when it touched upon the license of some of her schoolmates, aroused jealousy in some of them. Nevertheless, she was popular because of her cheerfulness, her musical ability (which was valuable in school productions), and her fondness for impersonations. She began her piano lessons with one of the Benedictine Sisters at the age of seven. One of her schoolmates recalled that Anna was skilled in art as well, adding that she "had the sweetest smile I ever knew; if something went wrong, she never became upset or cross; she just

smiled." We have record of only once when she was punished by a teacher, and that was simply for choosing an untimely method of putting a fly to death, by drowning it in her inkwell.



Anna prepared with great diligence and care for her first Holy Communion. When the day came, March 19, 1911, she arose early and dressed herself in the new white clothes which symbolized the spotlessness of her soul. She waited patiently for the others to prepare themselves, but could hardly contain her longing to receive Christ in the Eucharist. There is much evidence that her reception of Holy Communion for the first time marked the



beginning of a new maturity in her life, a search on her part for the best ways to please God. Ever after that day, Anna's father could not speak of it without the greatest emotion; he, too, must have sensed the first indications of Anna's longing for perfection. She

received Holy Communion thereafter as often as her confessor would permit, and daily when this was more readily allowed. She was confirmed by the Bishop of Crookston, Timothy Corbett, probably in 1912, though the record has been lost.

Anna's kindness and obedience endeared her to her parents and friends. She was especially careful not to hurt others in any way, and often deliberately deprived herself in order to please them. One Christmas her sister Emma and she overheard a conversation of their parents about the children's gifts, in the course of which Mrs. Zervas mentioned that perhaps Anna was now too old for them. Though deeply hurt, Anna warned her sister not to tell her mother that this remark had been overheard, and she proceeded

cheerfully to meet her parents without showing the slightest sign of disappointment.

She was fond of playing the piano, singing, or reciting poems on these festive occasions. Her uncle Frederick Levitre, in whose opinion Anna was being overworked at school because of her superior ability, liked to have her accompany him on long walks in order to build up her physical strength; this uncle's kind and practical influence was good for her spiritual growth as well, but she could not yet know what it would mean not to be able to thank God for the gift of health and for the enjoyment of His work in nature.

3

During Anna's last term at St. Joseph's School, a smallpox epidemic broke out, afflicting several of the Zervas children. In order not to miss her graduation, she stayed for a month at the home of a Mrs. Mary Schmitz at Fargo, North Dakota, just across the river from Moorhead. In this home she made fast friends of the small children, singing with them and entertaining them.

She made such an impression upon one of the young men who took his meals there that afterwards he called at the Zervas home and asked to accompany Anna to the theatre. This request Anna declined graciously, giving her parents no reason for her action beyond a smile. It is doubtful if they had any idea that she might be thinking of and preparing for offering her life to God in the convent; it is almost certain that Anna herself already did have these thoughts and was engaged in these preparations. Her spiritual maturity was becoming evident; when asked if she might not use her excellent talents to become the valedictorian of her class, she replied that she thought it was not right to try to surpass her schoolmates in such a deliberate fashion.

After graduation from St. Joseph's School, Anna attended the Sacred Heart Academy (now Shanley High School) in Fargo, a motherhouse of the Sisters of the Presentation, since there was no Catholic high school in Moorhead.

The Academy was two and one-half miles from the Zervas home, but in order not to miss Mass and Holy Communion each day, Anna walked every morning to St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral in Fargo, quickly ate a small breakfast after Mass in the Church vestibule, and then proceeded to school. Unless one remembers that the Fargo-Moorhead area is one of the coldest in the United States during the winter months, one will fail to appreciate the extent of this sacrifice, for Anna deliberately did not avail herself of transportation from her home at a later hour in order that she might continue her devotions. Once a curate at the Pro-Cathedral waited for her

Sorority & Fraternity for Youth and Young Adults

Sister Annella Zervas once walked the halls of Saint Joseph School and Sacred Heart Academy. Her life continues to speak to students and young adults who long to follow Christ with courage and joy. As part of the Guild's Sorority & Fraternity, you will:

- Pray for Sister Annella's canonization
- Learn her story and share it with others
- Grow in faith through resources, events, and community
- Help others discover that God is near, even in suffering

This is more than a membership—it's a movement of faith and friendship.

Say "yes" and let Sister Annella inspire you to live as a witness of Christ's love. Learn more at sisterannella.org.

in the vestibule after Mass, intending to speak a few words with her, but she remained at prayer in order not to have to disclose her sacrifice. Father Thomas Egan, the Rector, stated afterwards that if he had known of this sacrifice he would most certainly have given her breakfast in the rectory. "I'm glad he never found out!" was her only comment upon hearing this. And perhaps even the full significance of this remark is not at once appreciated, for there may well have lain beneath it a deep understanding of the nature of Christian mortification.

Anna's love for the Eucharist grew more extraordinary in these years; she developed a habit of frequently visiting the tabernacle, which she kept with perfect fidelity as long as she was able. One other point, small in itself but noteworthy when placed in connection with other facts of her life in this period, is that she insisted upon maintaining a simplicity of dress, and wore no jewelry except a bracelet which she had won for work at a Church bazaar and a little cross and chain given to her by her parents on the day of her first Holy Communion.

Anna was well-liked at the Academy, which she attended from September of 1914 to the spring of 1915; her deportment was exceptional. Toward the end of the school year she fell ill with diphtheria. It was her first bitter taste of the pain of confinement for illness, and her reaction is noteworthy; she immediately asked to be moved to the Detention Hospital in Fargo so that her young brother would be in no danger of contracting the disease. There she was greatly admired by the nurses for her help in comforting others in the midst of her own illness. One small child especially aroused her compassion. When she left the hospital, she gave one of her books, *The Catholic Girl's Guide*, to a non-Catholic nurse who, struck by Anna's virtue, had asked her for it.

Anna showed an active interest in the religious life while she was a student at the Academy. The Zervas home itself, as a matter of fact, was a place to learn about it, since religious were such frequent visitors there. Some of these visits may have had their luster somewhat dimmed for the children because of the clouds of cigar smoke and rather exclusive conversation which went with them, but the opportunity was nonetheless rare. There was also Mrs. Zervas's example of great respect for the religious life.

But it would appear that Anna's interest lay deeper, lay, in fact, in a genuine vocation to the religious life. She suffered many interior trials at this time, which are not infrequently the stamp of authenticity on a religious vocation. Of her own admission, she was subjected to strong fits of anger which, curiously enough, always came on Saturdays, her regular confession day; she said later that she often had to go out of the house to control herself, though neither her parents nor her sisters could ever recall an instance of this occurrence. There is reason to believe that the difficulties she experienced in preparing for her confessions may have originated in mild scrupulosity; at any rate, she frequently signaled others to confess before her, and one friend preserves for us the picture of Anna making an examination of conscience, "closing her eyes so as not to be distracted by the laughing, whispering youngsters."

Her delicacy, too, was a source of vexation to those about her and of embarrassment to herself. She was especially annoyed by flies and insects. Once her sister Mary scolded her for not cleaning the drain properly after washing the dishes; she was employing for this purpose two spoons in an awkward procedure to avoid the use of her hands. Mary warned her, "You will go to Purgatory for that some day," a remark of no invective and little importance except

that Anna was to recall it under far different circumstances years later. More important to observe is that Anna was overcoming these trials and temptations, and with each new victory came a greater thirst for perfection and longing for a life with that as its sole aim.

During the summer of 1915, therefore, Anna spoke very unequivocally of entering the convent. There seemed to be no great decision necessary as to which order she would enter; the Benedictines, who had been her teachers and friends from early youth, would now receive her into their great family. Because she had undergone such severe mental strain previous to this indication of her vocational choice, and because of her over-anxiety about her confessions, her parents thought it best that she consult her spiritual director, the Rev. Alfred Mayer, O.S.B., later the Prior of St. John's Abbey.

Anna was at this time, of course, only fifteen years of age, but she was obviously possessed of a clear mind and a superior sense of values. The fact that these trials before determining to enter the religious life did not destroy the clarity of her perception or the fervor of her piety is evident from a lengthy poem written by her at this time and entitled "Christ's Ways of Love." I reproduce three verses here, less for their literary value than for their content.

He waited long and called for me;
Still I my way did go,
Till, by this iron chain of love,
He took me as His own.

I thank Thee, then, my dearest Lord,
That Thou this trial didst send;
It was indeed a special grace
Sent down from Thy own hand.

Ah, yes, dear Lord, this is the way
 Thou didst win my heart to Thee,
 That it may be in life and death
 With Thee eternally.

Father Alfred in his own words, “always entertained a high regard of [Anna], on account of her extraordinary piety and her humble and childlike disposition; and for that reason I always took a special interest in her welfare....She sought only to please God and to do His Holy Will in all things, and hence labored but for God’s honor and glory. She sought to please God by an ardent desire and an earnest will to acquire virtue and perfection, a total renunciation and forgetfulness of the world and its vanities, an invincible fortitude in her sufferings....It was during the summer vacation of 1915 that she one day called on me and expressed to me her desire of going to the convent at St. Joseph and becoming a sister. I told her that I thought she had a religious vocation and advised her to carry out her holy design. She seemed to be so convinced of her religious vocation that she asked no questions and expressed no doubts or fears regarding it. After I had spoken to her some words of encouragement and explained to her, in short, the excellence of the religious state, she left happy and contented.”

When her parents later expressed some concern over the matter of her age, Father Alfred told them, “Don’t put anything in her way; she is not too young to give herself to God.” Mr. and Mrs. Zervas then “gladly consented,” as Mr. Zervas wrote, “to give back the child to Him from Whom they had received her.”

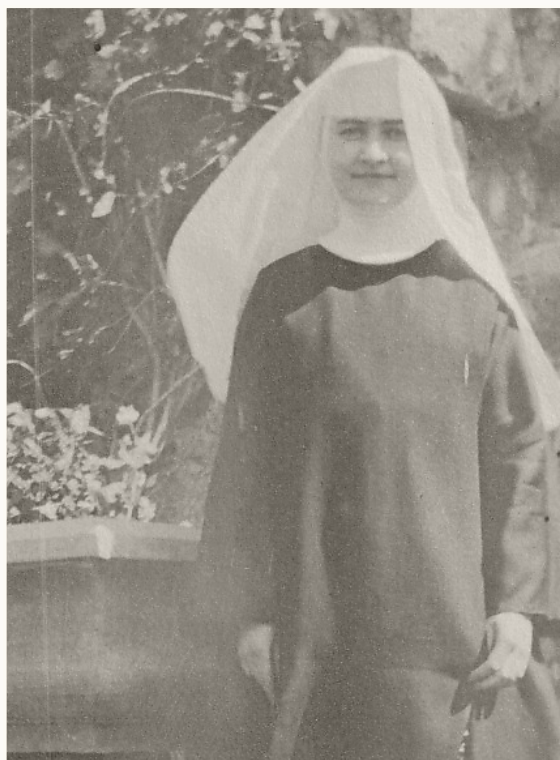
In August, 1915, after application had been made by mail to St. Benedict’s Convent in St. Joseph, Anna left for the convent, about one hundred and sixty miles from her home, accompanied by her

father. These first partings, from her mother and the children at home, and then from her father, who left her at St. Benedict's and went into retreat at St. John's Abbey, were very painful for Anna, for it must certainly be recognized that she was very attached to her family.

Still, she was not actually to enter the order as a novice for several years, and was not, after all, left without guidance. And if it was difficult for her, it was no less difficult for her parents, brothers, and sisters, to whom Anna had always been "an amiable and obedient child." But the knowledge that one of the highest honors possible for God to bestow upon them, that a member of their family was chosen to become a bride of Christ, sustained them in their sorrow.

This departure obviously marked a major turning point in Anna's life; she had sprung from and spent her childhood in a model Christian family, and now was to be transplanted into another. If the reader has found little which seems unusual to him in these first years of her life, let him at least bear in mind what he has found; for later it may be easier for him to see in these years the forming of a virtuous foundation which was to grow and sustain Anna Zervas throughout her life, and to assume a special importance in the years of suffering to follow.





CHAPTER TWO

1915-1924

1

The Order of St. Benedict,¹ to which Anna Zervas came as an aspirant in August of 1915, was founded by St. Benedict of Norcia in Italy in the sixth century. In order to escape the moral decadence which had taken hold of Rome as the Empire dissolved, St. Benedict retired to a cave in the mountains near Subiaco, about forty miles from Rome. His solitude was broken, however, by the advent of disciples who sought to imitate his holy life; he founded twelve small monasteries for his disciples, and, about 529, left Subiaco to found a monastery atop Monte Cassino, on the ancient road from Naples to Rome. There he composed his celebrated *Rule for Monks*, and died in 547.² His twin sister, St. Scholastica, whose death preceded Benedict's, had followed his example and gathered a group of pious women in a convent not far from Monte Cassino; they followed the same rule as the monks.³

From Italy the Benedictine monks and nuns spread their monasteries and convents over all of western Europe, and undertook missionary work on all the frontiers of Christendom. Every one of the great upheavals of Church history struck the order, but it was always reestablished, often with increased power and prestige; during the so-called "Dark Ages," the Benedictines were largely responsible

for the preservation of western culture. In our own day, they are especially distinguished by their leading role in the liturgical movement, the movement for the reunion of the Oriental Christian churches with the Holy See, and the task of revising the Vulgate.

The Benedictine community at St. Joseph, Minnesota,⁴ was one of the oldest in the United States. In 1852 Abbot Boniface Wimmer of St. Vincent's Abbey in Pennsylvania requested Benedictine sisters from St. Walburga's Convent, Eichstatt, Bavaria, to come to America. A small group under Mother Benedicta Riepp came and settled in St. Mary's, Elk County, Pennsylvania. Five years later, Bishop Cretin of St. Paul invited these sisters to come to Minnesota to help care for the German settlements in that area. Mother Benedicta responded, but by the time her group arrived at St. Paul, Bishop Cretin had died. The Rev. Demetrius di Marogna, the first Benedictine priest in the northwestern United States, directed the sisters to St. Cloud, Minnesota, where they arrived on June 20, 1857.

In 1863, under a new mother, Willibalda⁵, the sisters moved to a small frame structure at St. Joseph, built by order of Prior Othmar Wirz of St. John's Abbey at Collegeville. In November of the same year, a group of sisters left for Atchison, Kansas, to found the convent of St. Scholastica there. Mother Willibalda and a small group remained at St. Joseph. After a period of difficult times, the community began to prosper. In 1881, the Benedictine sisters from Shakopee, Minnesota, joined St. Benedict's and Mother Scholastica, under whom an ambitious building program was started, was elected.

In 1892, Mother Scholastica and twenty-four sisters went to Duluth, Minnesota, to form an independent house. Mother Cecilia was elected in 1901, and ruled for eighteen years. In 1914 the present Chapel of the Sacred Heart was completed. By 1928 the community numbered nine hundred and forty sisters, making it the largest

single Benedictine community in the world; with fourteen buildings on three acres, it was a prosperous and important convent.⁶

Prayer Gathering. All are invited to gather at the Our Lady of Lourdes Grotto at St. Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph, Minnesota, to pray for the canonization of Sister Annella and for the needs of the Church and the world. Visit sisterannella.org for dates and details.

The Rule of St. Benedict, which forms the basis of Benedictine life, is one of the great documents of Christian literature. It conceives of the individual community as a family rather than a "union" in the legal sense, differing in this respect from the oriental monastic rules and accounting in large part for its success and durability in the west. At the head of the monastery is the abbot or abbess elected for life, or, in the case of St. Benedict's, a reverend mother elected for a period of six years. The monk or nun is to grow in grace under the guidance of the Rule, the Gospels, and the five basic virtues stressed by the order: obedience, love of silence, humility, poverty, and stability. Chastity as such received no special treatment in the Rule because it was implied in the very idea of the monastic life.

Many excellent comprehensive studies of the Benedictine Rule and the history and spirit of the order are readily available for study, so it may be sufficient to say that the religious life known as Benedictinism is very ancient,⁷ and permeated completely with a striving after perfection. In our day, when monks are raised to the priesthood and nuns are greatly needed as teachers, a slight shift

of emphasis to intellectual pursuits has been effected, but manual labor and economic self-sufficiency are still regarded as essential.

Pray with the Guild. Join in the *Novena to St. Benedict for the Canonization of Sister Annella Zervas, OSB.*

Each day offers meditations from the *Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, drawing hearts deeper into prayer and trust in God's work through Sister Annella's life. Begin the novena today and unite your prayers with the Guild. Visit sisterannella.org to pray.

2

Anna's letters as an aspirant at St. Benedict's were filled with expressions of her happiness in the convent and great gratitude that her parents had permitted her to enjoy this happiness at such an early age. Yet she suffered at first from homesickness, so severely, in fact, that on several occasions she very nearly asked to be sent home. While home on vacation, however, she told her mother, "Mamma, I feel as if a strong elastic band were fastened at my chest drawing me to St. Benedict's." "Here," her father wrote, "was a peculiar phenomenon: homesickness at the convent and a strong longing for the convent while at home. The latter was no doubt evidence of her vocation, the former a trial permitted by God."

This homesickness never really left her, but it was greatly allayed by the gentle encouragement of the sister in charge of aspirants, Sister Celestine, and by Anna's own father. This nun recalled the following incident in connection with Anna's first visit home: "She returned

to find herself quite lonely and also not feeling well physically. She seemed dissatisfied and spoke of not having a vocation and wanting to return home. However, I thought it merely a passing fancy and said merely that she must first write and tell her folks. Upon receiving a very encouraging letter from her father, her temptation seemed to disappear at once, and I attributed it to her perfect and unhesitating obedience to her father." On November 3, 1916, Anna wrote the following to her father, bearing this out, "How your letters cheered me in sadness and gloom! It seems as though God Himself spoke to me through them."

Aside from homesickness, Anna had other trials as an aspirant. She was afflicted with a painful stomach disorder, which she described as a burning sensation whenever she ate. A sign of this disorder may have been certain marks on the skin of her face. Her meals, her fellow aspirants recalled, consisted mostly of soft foods, usually a type of corn mush; she was teased a great deal about it, but did not become impatient because of the teasing.

A thorough examination by a doctor disclosed no evident cause for the trouble, and remedies prescribed produced no cure; this affliction remained with her until her death. She was tasting the bitterness of physical suffering, and, a significant portent, was already something of a mystery to medical science.

Perhaps the best manner of relating the type of life Anna led as an aspirant is to quote passages from her own letters during this period, together with accounts by others who lived with her at this time.

On September 9, 1915, she wrote to her parents revealing some of her small duties, which pleased her very much, such as sweeping the sidewalks, caring for the Blessed Virgin's altar in the aspirants' assembly-room, and washing the dishes of the workers at the

Academy. "The number of aspirants," she wrote, "is increasing very quickly; we have now forty-seven and maybe more; some of them are not here but on missions. One of those here is thirteen years old; of course she is exceptionally young....You may be wondering what I do all during the day. In the morning, after we arise, which is at 5:45, we open the beds, draw the curtains, and clean in our alcove; then we go to the Chapel, at which time we receive Holy Communion and hear Holy Mass.

"After that we make our beds and go down to breakfast; we wash the dishes, then go to school or [do] whatever else we have to do. At 10:45 I bring the mail from the Academy, Convent, and parish house to the post office; then, when I have time, I sweep the walks; at about 12:00 we have dinner; then we wash those dishes, after which I bring the mail at 1:00; I practice [the piano] at 1:40, and go to class till 3:40; we study or do some other work till supper at 6:00; after our work at that time is finished, we go for a walk, and on certain days we have Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament; then we study, and if we have none of that to do, we may go to Chapel when the sisters have left it, and say our night prayers individually, and later...our prayers together."

On June 2, 1916, she expressed her anticipation of receiving the habit of the order. "Over half of us, I think, are going to receive the Holy Habit. Of course I should be most happy to be among them, but God is pleased to have it otherwise....I am happy as can be....I have been given the music room charge. I have about twenty little music rooms to clean daily. I imagine it will be a great pleasure. So many girls have come back from mission, and it seems like a family reunion around here. And of those that are to receive the habit, one is more happy than the other. Well, maybe next year they can say that about me. God knows."

In April, 1917, the United States entered World War I on the side of the Allies against the Central Powers and Anna felt the crisis deeply, more deeply, perhaps, than most of the other aspirants, as is attested by one story of one of her friends. "During the time when war was at its worst, [Anna] was very much alarmed. It was on the feast of All Saints [1917] when I came to the assembly-room and [was] very much surprised that everything was so quiet....Here were all the girls grouped around Anna. I, too, walked over to see what was going on. She was telling them...things she had heard. There is just one thing I remember that she said, and that was that we might be sent home on account of hard times. This was getting too serious for one of the girls; she stepped from the crowd and began singing in a loud voice, 'With the Church today rejoice, etc.' Anna gave a hearty laugh and joined her in the song."

Sister Annella's story is tied to the **Benedictine spirit of Little Falls**. If this is part of your story too, know that the Sister Annella Guild is grateful for you. May this biography strengthen your trust in God, and may you pass it along as a blessing to someone else. Free and print versions available at sisterannella.org.

During the winter of 1917, Anna was sent as a substitute music teacher to the Benedictine Convent in Little Falls, Minnesota, for a period of a few months. On December 23 of that year, her father wrote her his Christmas letter, which is so remarkable that I reproduce most of it here: "Within twenty-four hours the first '*Gloria in excelsis*' will be intoned in the Far East, and will re-echo and reverberate over the plains of Asia, the battle-struck countries of

Europe, and will reach our own shores about six to eight hours later: peace on earth to men of good will—which is so sadly lacking; therefore the dove of peace cannot find a resting place.

“May the Holy Infant, the ‘Prince of Peace,’ arouse the nations of the world out of their lethargy, their mire of sin, their godless living, as He once aroused the ancient nations against their will (if we may say so). But the world is not wrapped in darkness as formerly; the spirit of indifferentism, of materialism and worldliness holds them in its fetters, and therefore all who have received the light, and are so happy as to know and understand this truth, must pray fervently for the nations, that God may grant them the light of His grace. All daily communicants and those who attend Mass should join the priest fervently at the Offertory when he offers the bread and wine for ‘the whole world, all the living and the dead.’

“One cannot attend Mass regularly with devotion and attention without feeling his heart enlarged by the prayers of the Church during the Sacrifice. And therefore we will all join in with the Church on the feast of Christmas and during every Holy Mass, and ask that the glory of God be promoted, His doctrine be spread, and the nations converted. Our prayers are powerful during Mass, for our prayers are then united with Christ’s prayers, and are therefore more pleasing to God.

“When I think about John’s [his adopted son] dangerous position at sea, my brother, brother-in-law, cousins, and schoolmates, fighting, bleeding, perhaps dying, then I feel a call of duty to pray for them, pray for peace, that they [may] also have a Merry Christmas....My dear Anna, I am glad to know you [are] in your field of labor, your preparation for the sisterhood. It’s like an inland bay, secure from all tempests of the sea, a safe harbor; would that many more of our family would seek its shelter.

"Pray for all, that none may miss their vocation in life as outlined by Divine Providence....Well, Anna, this letter appears to me more as a kind of reverie than a Christmas greeting, but my thoughts seem to run that way most of the time....May the Divine Infant fill your heart with true Christmas joys, and may you ere-long be united to Him as His bride, an honor my personal unworthiness never had dreamed of. My prayers follow you daily, and I make a memento for you at every Mass."

With the opportunity to benefit from "reveries" of this sort, it is not surprising that Anna made rapid progress in the spiritual life. Four days later she replied, describing the Christmas celebration at St. Benedict's. "The beautifully decorated and illumined Chapel," she wrote, "looked like a little heaven, and might indeed have been rightly called such, for the same God was also there." She went on to describe her frequent visits to the Christmas crèche during the day, and a rarely permitted conversation with her friends in the novitiate.

"I could hardly have been happier," she concluded, "though the thought of Christmas away from you may have once seemed sad; I now feel that I have been already well-paid for my sacrifice." She added that she had had "some very bright pupils " in Little Falls. "One day after I had told a little girl that she must always practice scales, even after she graduated, she looked at me and said, 'Sister, have you graduated yet?' There are Zervases there; I think, though, that they are related not to us, but to each other."

Friends who were aspirants with Anna have left us some of the most valuable and illuminating memories of these years. One of them, who admitted that she was not particularly impressed with Anna at first, wrote, "One of the girls told me, 'Anna Zervas is a saint.' I looked up at her in great surprise, but I did not reveal my thoughts

to her....From that day on I watched every action of [Anna's]. It was not long [before] I saw what I was told....Her politeness and kindness manifested itself in many ways."

"One instance I remember very distinctly. Her father sent her a large chocolate Easter egg for Easter. She took the box in the assembly-room and, on opening it, found the egg broken. She immediately added that she was not going to tell him it was broken because he would feel badly about it. It was a custom among the girls that if one received a box from home, she would invite four or five of her friends to share it with [her]. It was not so with Anna; she had to share it with everyone. The egg she cut into fifty or sixty pieces, so that each might have a taste. I asked her why she did that, [pointing out that] her father might also feel badly if he knew she was giving it [all] away....She answered by saying that her father would be very happy to think that his daughter wasn't selfish."

One of Anna's best friends wrote, "[She] and I spent many hours of recreation together during our aspirants' life. We were intimate friends and therefore had many confidential talks together, often on religious subjects. She enjoyed such conversations very much. This caused her to be misunderstood many times, as some seemed to think such piety was [feigned], and were annoyed at her extreme exactness in fulfilling her obedience and other little duties. I sometimes heard the girls remark, 'Anna Zervas...wouldn't do the least thing out of the way.' This would make her feel very bad, and sometimes brought tears to her eyes.

"I also noticed that she was very scrupulous about not giving a good example, and it worried her if she thought her duties were not performed as well as possible....On [one] occasion while we both were washing the basement windows, we had a spiritual conversation on death; she expressed her joy by saying how good

it felt to speak of such subjects. She would have enjoyed such talks more often, but she feared that this would not be so agreeable to others. She often told me instances about her home life which showed that [her family was] very religious, [and had] spiritual reading in common. I noticed that she loved to read...*The Following of Christ*. When I left her to enter the novitiate a year before she did, she cried because she could not enter [with me]."

Another friend wrote, "[She] was neatness personified! She took great pains to have her clothes darned neatly, and her uniform pressed carefully....I remember her saying, 'I like persons who are neat; they always make me think they have a well-kept soul. However, I find it hard to be neat.'" Her tidiness is confirmed by another account. "Her shoes many a time were old and patched, but always nicely polished....Her hair she did up in a most common way, parting it in the center, [rolling it] up on the sides, with a neat pug in the back. Friday afternoons were our mending days. She would come along with an armful of old stockings, one pair more shabby-looking than the other, but they were always too good for her to throw away."

Anna had certain faults and difficulties, too. The prefect of the dormitory during the time Anna was an aspirant recalled that she was often very restless at night, and that it was jokingly suggested that it might be necessary to "tie her down." The aspirants slept in curtained alcoves. But her greatest difficulty was her tardiness. "[She] found it very difficult to be punctual," one aspirant wrote. "She was always late in Chapel in the morning," another wrote. "Whenever she stood in rank with the rest of us, waiting to go, we would look at each other and laugh, because it was so seldom that she was there. But after she did get to Chapel, one could see that her mind was all in prayer. She had been scolded and teased many a time for her slowness. I remember...it was of profit to her."



On June 17, 1918, in the afternoon, Anna Zervas received the habit of the Benedictine Order; the ceremony was conducted in the Sacred Heart Chapel at St. Benedict's by the Most Rev. Joseph F. Busch, the Bishop of St. Cloud. This was the day which Anna had so eagerly awaited; in a simple, beautiful ceremony, she exchanged an elegant bridal gown for the severe religious habit. Her expression of happiness upon returning from the sanctuary that day was termed "angelic" by one witness.

A notable incident occurred after this ceremony. Anna rushed to tell her parents her new religious name, Sister Mary Annella.

Her mother remarked at once, not unkindly, "But there is no *Saint Annella*," to which Sister Annella, concealing her slight disappointment at this reaction to the name by which she would henceforth be known, replied firmly, "Then I shall have to be the first one!"

3

The novitiate of any religious order is "a time of trial, a time during which the young novice is fully trained in all that pertains to the religious life, so that she may better decide whether she belongs in the convent, and whether or not she should consecrate herself to God for life in the religious state, or return again to the world."⁸ The discipline of the novitiate is therefore extremely rigid, as ordered by the canons of the Church and the customs of the individual orders; few days go by without some specific test of the vocation of the religious, some special tax on her virtues and firmness of intention.

At St. Benedict's the novice wears a white veil to distinguish her from the professed nuns; during the year she takes no part in the academic or other pursuits of professed nuns and receives no visitors, but occupies the year with a careful study of the Holy Rule of St. Benedict and the demands of the religious life, and in manual labor. This is in perfect keeping with the wish of St. Benedict, who wrote in his Rule, chapter 58, "To one who is newly come for the reformation of his life, let not an easy entrance be granted, but, as the Apostle says, 'Test the spirits to see whether they are from God [1 John, 4: 1].'"

Sister Annella's year in the novitiate was one of the greatest profits to her soul. Her mistress of novices wrote of her, "In her spiritual exercises she was very exact. Although she found the keeping of silence rather hard, she never neglected to confess her fault for any breach of silence, and sometimes kept it perfectly for a week or longer at a time. She was at all times grateful for any advice or instruction. Especially during general instruction, whether that was given by the reverend chaplain or by the novice mistress, it often was a source of real joy to see Sister Annella's attentive attitude."

Indeed, her attitude during these instructions struck many of the other novices. One wrote, "She would get up and ask one question after another until she clearly understood what Father meant, even if the other sisters laughed at the questions she put before him. "I admired her for her humility," another wrote. "She was so eager to be instructed....She always had something pleasant to say to us. I... never heard her say an uncharitable word. I remember very many recreations in the novitiate were spent in Sister Annella's playing the piano and singing, and we all joined in."

Another novice wrote, "Sister Annella had a great esteem for all her sisters, and suffered nothing to be said against any of them.

When an unkind or imprudent remark was made in her presence, she would very often take the part of the absent one by placing a favorable construction on what had been said....She had no particular friends, but associated with all."

She frequently required a somewhat longer time to prepare for her confessions than the others for theirs, and signaled them to go into the confessional ahead of her. Her spiritual notes were carefully written, and evidence the progress she was making in virtue. One resolution was, "With the grace of God I am determined to become a saint!" This was repeated in her diary.

During the winter of 1918, Sister Annella was one of seventeen novices who were ill with influenza. Since so many were ill from all departments of St. Benedict's, the novices were placed together in one dormitory. The novice mistress wrote, "Sister [Annella] was very patient, and when she was convalescent, she did much to cheer up her companions who were still very sick. She was never robust, but was able to make herself useful by many little services, which she always accompanied with some cheerful words or a winning smile....I tried to let her have all the out-door exercise that could be had, so besides the daily walks she took in company with the entire class during recreation, Sister helped to work in the garden during the summer and sweep the sidewalks in winter. She was glad to do this....Sometimes when she was reminded of some duty, she would kneel at once....She wanted to practice humility and learn to take corrections graciously."

"An occasion [when] Sister [Annella] practiced the virtue of humility," wrote a novice, "was the time when we were about to celebrate our dear mistress's name day. Being one of the older novices, she was asked to take the work in hand and make preparations for the feast. Instead of helping in the refectory, where she had been

assigned work, she went to the novitiate. No sooner had she started the preparations for the feast when the novice mistress entered and reproved her for not being where duty called her. Without excuse or the least sign of displeasure, Sister left the novitiate and went to her work of obedience."

She had to be reminded to wear gloves and overshoes in cold weather, apparently, and during Lent took daily penances for the fault. Once she asked one of her fellow novices, "Sister, don't you think I'm proud?" She received a negative reply. But she said that she internally felt it, and with Mary's help would overcome it.

Punctuality was still not one of her strong points. When she made a special effort to get to Chapel on time in the mornings, something forgotten would usually send her back to the dormitory and make her late for prayers. It was a curious fault. A novice wrote, "She always rose at the first sound of the bell and hastily dressed herself; she and I would start from the novitiate dormitory at the same time." Yet, in spite of her haste, she would always be delayed or sent back for something. She told this novice that she "simply couldn't " be on time, and that she would have to obtain this grace. She promised the same novice that she would teach her to love Mary, and the novice replied, "I'll teach you to love the Sacred Heart." When they drew their titles⁹ sometime later, they chanced to be together; Sister Annella drew "of the Sweet Heart of Jesus," and her companion "of the Pure Heart of Mary." They were both "very happy, and proudly said, 'I told you so!'" The novice concludes, "[Sister Annella] loved the Virgin Mary to such an extent that everything, every good work, every prayer, and every pain passed through the Blessed Virgin's hands into those of Jesus."

Sister Annella wrote to her parents on December 30, 1918, "Advent was spent in a somewhat more recollected manner than the rest

of the year, to prepare a throne for the little Infant in our hearts.... [Christmas] was indeed a lovely day when celebrated as an aspirant, but I cannot tell you what that day is here in the novitiate. Perhaps it is a good thing that everyone doesn't know of the joys we experience; they might all become religious....I pictured Christmas at home as it used to be in Santa-Claus time. Those were happy days. How beautiful it must be now [that] you can all receive the Infant God, Who is born anew upon the altar."

Another novice adds a striking story of Sister Annella's humility during this year. "She enjoyed playing the Chapel organ, and one day she asked me if I would tell her what songs I liked to hear played best. I told her, and that evening she played them, to my great surprise. Afterwards I mentioned it, and she said, 'I always think I'm playing in heaven for Jesus, and so last night I just thought I'd play for Him what someone else enjoyed listening to.'"

Still another wrote, "During the novitiate, when the novices studying choir work were given an opportunity to play for services, Sister Annella played very well, and seldom made a mistake. On one occasion when I played, I made very many mistakes. The novice mistress evidently was under the impression Sister Annella had played, and reprimanded her for making so many mistakes after studying the organ so long, and mentioned how well I played [after having] taken the organ so short a time. Sister Annella mentioned this to me sometime later. I wanted to make it right with the novice mistress, but Sister Annella begged me not to, but looked at it as a little joke on herself, and said, 'What difference does it make who receives the blame for the mistake, since you didn't do it intentionally?'"

A great joy awaited Sister Annella towards the end of her year of novitiate. Her sister Mary entered St. Benedict's as an aspirant on

March 29, 1919. On April 21, Sister Annella wrote of her great joy at this event, "Mary seemed almost as overcome as I, and when I had repeated 'I'm so glad' and other such expressions, I finally gave her a chance to speak....Yes, God has indeed been infinitely good towards us, and especially to her... That evening while praying office I felt much reason to praise the infinite goodness of God. There seems to have been joy all around....God's ways are wonderful, and His grace works in a mysterious manner so often....Please pray for all who intend or expect to bind themselves by triennial and perpetual vows to....Jesus, the Spouse of our souls. If He wills, may none of us be denied this great honor and happiness beyond expression in words." On June 23, she signed herself, "Your happy daughter."

On July 11, 1919, the feast of the Solemnity of St. Benedict,¹⁰ Sister Annella was admitted to triennial, or temporary vows, which ended her period of novitiate and marked the commencement of a period of three years in regular convent work, at the close of which she would be admitted to simple perpetual, or final vows. This ceremony is of a more solemn nature than reception, and is held in conjunction with Holy Mass.

The ceremony was attended by Sister Annella's parents and her sisters Emma and Cecilia from home, and by Mary, now an aspirant. On August 8, she wrote, "Words cannot come near expressing the happiness of belonging to Jesus. But a still greater feast awaits me, if God wills, when I can say, 'I am Thine, my Jesus, forever!'"

4

Shortly after the profession of her triennial vows, Sister Annella was assigned to St. Mary's Convent, Bismarck, North Dakota, as music teacher in the school and organist of the Pro-Cathedral. She left St. Benedict's for Bismarck in August, 1919, in the company of the superior of her new convent, Sister Magdalen.

If you are a parishioner of **Saint Mary's parish community in Bismarck**, know that this place held some of the happiest days of Sister Annella's life. She delighted in teaching and playing music here, and Saint Mary's became her longest apostolate. Because Saint Mary's was so dear to Sister Annella, it is also dear to the Sister Annella Guild. We invite you to carry forward her story, share the Catholic faith she passed on, and join the Guild in praying and working for her canonization.

Learn more and become a member at sisterannella.org.

The years she spent in Bismarck were, in many respects, the happiest of Sister Annella's earthly life. Her duties kept her days busy, as her crowded little appointment-book testifies; but time and time again she was seen in the Chapel, kneeling, as she had done as a child, without support, in the aisle before the Blessed Sacrament. What conversations of love passed between Christ and His spouse are not for us to know, but they prepared Sister Annella for trials to come.

The Rev. John A.H. Slag, pastor of St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral and Sister Annella's spiritual director at this time, wrote of her, "Two things were outstanding with her, namely her great love for Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and her exact obedience. Time and again I found her in the Chapel of the convent making her private visits to the Blessed Sacrament. Her whole behavior in the presence of our Eucharistic Lord indicated her living faith in the Real Presence." On Christmas Day, 1919, Sister Annella wrote to her parents, "What

could we do without Holy Communion? How dreadfully lonely and miserable we should be without Jesus; if all the poor people in the world only knew! Here I need only take a few steps, sometimes, from where I am teaching to visit Him, and lay my troubles at His feet, and then gather new courage to begin again."

Several years later, on December 29, 1922, she was writing in a similar vein, "I don't know what we would do without Holy Communion every day. When I think of how seldom people used to be allowed to receive, I cannot imagine it, except that the day must have been quite a gloomy one....Jesus is the only one Who really understands us and can help us....What a wonderful consolation and real strength we receive from this truest and most unchangeable of friends."

Her attitude toward suffering and misfortune, too, was fixed. She wrote late in 1920 to her parents, who had informed her of some illnesses in the family: "Our dear Lord had some design in permitting it." She herself had an attack of appendicitis in February, 1920, and was told that an operation would have to be performed if another attack occurred. "I'll take care that it doesn't come!" she wrote, but come it did, and an appendectomy was performed in April. She wrote after the operation, "I was...perfectly satisfied even to die. That may account for my easy awakening!"

Sister Annella's zeal in following Pope St. Pius X's instructions concerning sacred music made her a capable assistant for the Pro-Cathedral's liturgical functions. She loved Gregorian chant as much as her father loved it, and used every opportunity to employ it in church services. In March, 1921, she wrote, "I think you would love Gregorian music if you could hear it sung as we sometimes hear it." And on December 29, 1922, she commented on Father Slag's diligence in working for congregational singing. She described her

duties in a letter at the end of 1919, "Our music class is increasing continually; quite a few beginners....I have some that pay me back for playing fast [as a beginner]....[I] play for all the high masses, and low masses when singing is wanted; also for all weddings, funerals, and requiems....Then I have six singing classes a week, about three hours [of] choir practice, and of course all the playing at other services."

Her pupils remembered Sister Annella as an understanding but exacting teacher. Her love of music made her a perfectionist. Her superior wrote, "Her sense of harmony was so keen that any discord tortured her. Time and time again I have seen her leave the Chapel when someone was practicing in the next room, and stop the practicing or correct the discord."

Another of Sister Annella's sisters, Emma, entered St. Benedict's Convent on September 1, 1919, and to that joy was added, the following year, that of having Emma as an assistant in the music department at Bismarck from September 1, 1920, to June, 1921, and again from February to June of 1922. The two sisters spent many happy hours together during that time; it was a great sorrow for Sister Annella when Emma returned to St. Benedict's. Their sister Mary had been received into the novitiate on June 15, 1921, as Sister Mary Ignatia.

Marshal Ferdinand Foch, once Supreme Commander of Allied Military Power in Europe, visited Bismarck on November 27, 1921. Sister Annella wrote, "He is a 'typical Frenchman'....appears to be a very pious man, and the fact that he should have wired here to have Mass celebrated when he arrived, that he might assist, is quite a proof of his faith and piety... I heard tonight that he used to spend much time in meditation, which with the prayers of the

children, for which he would always ask, has helped him, no doubt, to win the victory.”

Typical of the kind of embarrassing little faults which Sister Annella was striving to overcome in these years were her forgetfulness (“I kind of forgot “ was one of her favorite phrases) and her propensity for misplacing things. Her sister Emma finally gave her a new pencil on a chain so that she would always have one, and was not surprised when, very soon afterwards, Sister Annella was quizzically contemplating the empty chain. In one of her letters these two little faults are delightfully combined: “I left our scissors (at least I *think* so)...in St. Joseph.”

Throughout these years, while happy in the performance of her work, Sister Annella was besieged by temptations not unfamiliar to religious, to leave her convent life; these came more frequently as the time for her perpetual vows grew steadily nearer. She kept these temptations carefully hidden to all but her spiritual director; largely through his help, she remained steadfast. Her letters were full of thoughts on this subject, continuing to reflect her joy in the religious life, but reflecting some probing meditations as well.

On April 12, 1920, she wrote to her parents, “What lot would now be mine had you refused me when I wished to enter the service of God, and not assisted me in doing so? I have been so happy, have experienced so many joys since I entered the home of the spouses of Jesus. Only pray that my life may not make me prove ungrateful for so many graces and blessings as I have received.”

Again, in November of the same year, “A thought has come to me, but I have one which overcomes it. I have thought how ungrateful I must seem to have helped you so little before I left home. But ‘He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me,’

[Matthew 10:37]. On December 22, 1920, she wrote, "We remember the dear parents who have done so much for us when we needed so much care—which you never refused us, no matter what it cost you," and, on January 26, 1921, "May God bless you, dear parents, and grant that you may live long and happy lives, and thus be truly happy in serving Him here on earth, that you may enter a life of eternal joy and happiness when Jesus calls you to receive the reward He has promised to the faithful servant."

"It seems to me," she wrote on April 18, 1921, "not another...has parents as good as mine." In her Christmas letter of 1921, she wrote, "I just imagined all kinds of scenes at home....how Christmas used to be when Emma went around the house saying her little piece....I remember, too, how we used to hide our eyes so as not to see the tree before time! Those were happy days. And today, it seems to me, was the first time that I ever felt so much like I used to at Christmas since I left home....I am quite satisfied with my new life and am quite at home now, still there are always a few days during which I feel sometimes quite blue, but when these feelings are offered up to God for a good purpose, and fought against, they only help me to merit more for heaven."

To her grandmother Levitre she wrote, on April 17, 1922, "I am so happy in my present home, and I know you are glad to hear of it, too. We can never thank our dear Lord enough for having called us to be His brides." And so, gradually, the temptations were countered and the final decision made.

5

Sister Annella made her profession of perpetual vows at St. Benedict's on July 11, 1922. This ceremony, of unparalleled solemnity, includes the reading of formulae of profession

in which the religious vow stability, conversion of morals,¹¹ and obedience according to the Rule of St. Benedict, for the remainder of their lives. There is the solemn prostration beneath a black pall, vividly symbolizing their death to the world, then the blessing and conferring of choir cloaks, rings, and wreaths, and finally the hymn of thanksgiving and the offering of candles.



The Preface “for strength and virtue,” which the officiating bishop recites over the prostrated religious, is perhaps the keynote of the ceremony; it begs God to “accept...the vows and religious profession of these Thy handmaids, who flee from the vanity, distractions, and turmoil of this world...May they be dead to this world, may they be crucified to the enticing allurements of the world, may they be far removed from worldly pomps, free from evil thoughts, safe from the evils of this present life, secure against all the snares of the wicked.

“Teach them, O Lord, to despise all the fortunes of this life, not to fear adversities; not to inflict injuries, but calmly to bear wrongs done to them. May pride not elate them, nor the desires of avarice enkindle them, nor the incitements of lust inflame them, nor vain glory shamefully overpower them. Enlighten their minds that they may, in thought and deed, meditate and learn to know Thee through the study of Thy divine teachings, and serve Thee day and night, strive after heavenly and eternal things, and despise the perishable things of this earth....and may they always have with them and desire Thee, the Omnipotent, in their hearts and on their lips.”

Sister Annella’s joy on this day was increased by the fact that her sister, Sister Ignatia, made triennial vows at the same ceremony; and Emma had received the habit, with the name Sister Mary De’

Pazzi, at the ceremony of reception on June 15, and was now a novice. The knowledge that the three of them were united in the great Benedictine Order was a source of tremendous spiritual happiness for themselves and their family. Sister Annella remarked to her mother after the ceremony, "My next great feast will be when I leave this world."

Even this day was not without an affliction, however. Her parents expressed a desire to visit St. John's Abbey in the company of Sister Annella, Sister Ignatia, and Cecilia. Permission for this visit was obtained from the reverend mother, but made it necessary that Sister Annella remove her profession wreath, which she could have worn at St. Benedict's throughout the day, but never again until her death. To forego this privilege was extremely painful to Sister Annella, but she did it to please her parents, who remained completely unaware of this sacrifice until they were told by Sister Ignatia after Sister Annella's death. "It seems," wrote Mr. Zervas, "as if God permitted [our] ignorance of that sacrifice to act as a test of Sister Annella's heroic self-sacrificing soul."

Sister Annella returned to Bismarck shortly after her profession. Sister Ignatia was assigned to the convent at Melrose, Minnesota. On July 30, 1922, Sister Annella wrote to her parents, "I have really noticed a great difference since profession day. I know now it is the effect of prayers. I cannot say how happy I have been and am. Every day seems to bring with it so much to make me feel how good God is. The reward which He has prepared for us in heaven is surely worth the little we can do, if even here we experience such joy."

To Sister De' Pazzi in the novitiate she wrote on Christmas Day, 1922, "Well, dear sister, your novitiate year is very soon coming to its close, and I am sure it has been a time of happy moments, and no doubt our heavenly Spouse allowed some pricking thorns to fall

in your way at times; but He knows why. He wants your soul to be purified and adorned before He receives its vows to be His forever.”

The school year was a busy one for Sister Annella; the number of music students was increasing considerably, and more and more duties were falling upon her shoulders. Yet her superior wrote of her, “Sister Annella...was obedient and respectful, always willing to put herself out to assist others. I do not think she ever refused a favor to anyone who requested....In fact, I thought she was too willing along these lines, as her own duties were such that her time was all taken. She was kind and charitable to everyone, though at times I know she suffered [from the] unkind remarks of others; these as a rule she kept to herself, though on some occasions she came to me like a little child to tell me how she felt regarding these matters. When she did so, she always said, ‘Sister, I do not want to be uncharitable, but I feel you should know this.’ Her great fault was [that] she was too timid, or rather fearful, regarding her spiritual affairs.

“She was very forgetful. It seems this had always been one of her trials. We teased her about it a great deal, and at times I corrected her for it, telling her how important it was for her to try [to] remember....I know she took a deep interest in the souls of the children [whom] she taught, and never [let] a chance pass if there was an opportunity for her to give a child good advice.”

On April 1, 1923, Sister Annella wrote to her parents, “When it pleases [Our Lord] to permit you to carry a part of His heavy cross, may He also sweeten it with His grace and His love....I cannot forget my happiness on the day of perpetual consecration to Jesus. Does it not seem really too wonderful to be true that God should have chosen us to be His own in life and forever? The more I think of this, the more perplexed I become. God’s infinite love and unsearchable ways are all the reason for this unspeakable grace.”

6

The disease which was to take Sister Annella's life, after three years of intense suffering, seems to have made its first appearance in May of 1923. She noticed at this time some dark red-brown spots on her forearm and, supposing that she had contracted a simple skin-rash, called it to the attention of her superior. She was treated for liver disorder, of which the spots were thought to be a symptom, at St. Alexis Hospital in Bismarck.

In July, 1923, she was given a ten-day vacation at home which coincided with Sister De' Pazzi's profession of triennial vows. There she mentioned to her mother that her arms itched quite badly, and showed them to her. Mrs. Zervas suggested that it might be a heat-rash. "No," her daughter replied, "it is not a heat-rash. When the children in our school at Bismarck have that, Sister puts on some lard and sulfur and it goes away, but this does not go away."

She also visited her grandmother Levitre and asked her opinion; her grandmother examined the spots closely, and declared that they did not appear to her to be a simple rash. Sister Annella explained that the spots were accompanied by a burning sensation, which sometimes caused her to wake during the night. She affirmed that



she had not come into contact with any poisonous weeds when it was suggested that the disturbance might have originated in that way. A photograph, the best known of Sister Annella, was taken at this time, and shows signs of her suffering and exhaustion. Another, and in some respects better, photograph was taken about a month later, after she had returned to Bismarck. It appears as the frontispiece to this book.

The trip to St. Joseph, for Sister De' Pazzi's profession, was made on July 10. As the dome of St. Benedict's came into view, Sister Annella clasped her hands over her chest and exclaimed, "Oh, it seems so good to see St. Benedict's again!" Her mother looked at her in astonishment, but realized immediately how inexpressibly dear to her daughter was the chapel in which she had consecrated herself forever to Christ. But again a suffering, "a splinter of the cross," as Mr. Zervas called it, awaited Sister Annella. Arriving at St. Benedict's, she led her parents to an empty parlor and disappeared for a short while. During this time another nun appeared, and asked them, somewhat curtly, who they were and how they got there. "We are Sister Annella's parents," was the reply. "Sister took us to this room." "She should have known better," the nun remarked.

When Sister Annella returned, her eyes were wet with tears; she offered no explanation, but said that she indeed "should have known better." I do not record this event to embarrass the nun, should she be still living, for it is perfectly understandable, as Sister Annella herself wrote later, that "order is necessary among so many," but rather as an excellent example of the kind of trials which Sister Annella seemed to have to face with inordinate frequency, and of how she conducted herself in the face of them. Despite this occurrence it must be said, she did her best to entertain her parents and to make her sister's great day more enjoyable. Shortly afterwards, Sister Annella was taken by her parents to spend a day with Sister Ignatia, who was attending the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. Sister Ignatia wrote later, "I noticed [that she] was very thin and did not look well, so I asked her what the trouble was. Sister smiled sweetly and said, 'Mary, I don't think I ever will be well.' I knew she was suffering with stomach trouble at the time, but knew of nothing else.'

"Sister was extremely tired the day she came and it was very warm, being the middle of July. My parents planned to take her to the parks, the state capitol and other places of interest, not realizing how fatigued she was. [She] told me she could scarcely walk, and would have preferred to remain quiet, but not to disappoint mother and father, she went without saying a word....and even did her utmost to appear cheerful and pleased."

When she returned to Bismarck, after her "vacation," she was totally exhausted. "She told me later," Sister Ignatia continued, "that the morning she had returned she was sent to bed. She was [so] tired [that] she threw herself, dressed as she was, on her bed and fell asleep. The convent is large and everybody was busy, so she was not missed all day. But that evening they were to have Benediction in the sisters' chapel, and when all had assembled and the Rev. Father was vested and ready to commence services, no organist was there.

"It suddenly dawned on the superior that she had not seen Sister [Annella] since sending her to bed in the morning. Going quickly to her cell, she found [her] just as she had thrown herself on the bed in the morning. Several sisters who were there with her tried to awaken Sister Annella. They got her in a sitting position, but had much difficulty in making it clear to her where she was, and finally, that she was expected downstairs to play for Benediction. The next morning, when the signal for rising rang, [she] rose, but fell over the bed in a faint."

She did her best, for better or worse, to hide the fact that the disease of her skin was growing steadily worse. In July, 1923, she wrote to her sister Cecilia, "Now I am fine....I was not very sick, except my stomach, and so I did not want any worry wasted." She wrote somewhat more candidly to Sister De' Pazzi the following week, "My

visit home was most enjoyable....I felt quite strange most of the time, though. But they surely tried to make it pleasant, and I appreciated it....[Resign] yourself to the holy will of Jesus, our heavenly Spouse, whose infinite love will not permit Him to forsake those who place their hope and trust always in Him....Haven't we a wondrous lot to be thankful for! God has surely shown us every special favor, and we must give all we can in return."

To her parents she wrote in October, "God's ways are not ours.... thanks be to God, to Whom all thanks and praises are due, and may He bless our work and make it fruitful for a happy eternity." It is noteworthy, I think, that her thoughts had turned to self-oblation and eternity.

On November 11, her parents paid Sister Annella a visit. While conversing with them, she would slip her hands into her sleeves and grasp her arms tightly in order to avoid scratching them. Her mother's attention was drawn to this, and she asked if the skin disease had not yet disappeared. "No, Mamma," she replied simply, "it hasn't." Occasionally during this visit, Sister Annella would leave the room, evidently to ease the itching which pained and tormented her. When her parents left, she showed that homesickness, "my soul's affliction," as she called it, still troubled her. "It was an affliction which was hard to bear—an unsatisfying longing of a loving heart," her father wrote.

After Christmas she wrote to her parents, "I thought of what to ask for you during Forty Hours Devotions, which we had not long before Christmas. And the best thing I thought to ask for was the grace of perfect resignation and conformity with God's holy will, for if you have this....you shall have every desire granted." The same day she wrote to her brother Hubert, "The time when I feel most confidence in prayer is after Holy Communion, when Jesus is so close that He

hears the gentlest whisper and knows the unuttered prayers, and at the elevation of the Mass, where Jesus prays for us Himself....I have known from experience that what we ask at these times we may be sure God has heard, and will grant what He sees best."

Determined to carry on her work in spite of everything, Sister Annella was forced to endure great mental and physical suffering. She rose several times during each night to take cold shower-baths to relieve the intense burning and itching of her body. Yet although she missed much sleep every night, she continued to teach. As described later to Mr. Zervas, "During teaching hours she would sit or walk the floor, her hands in her sleeves, her fingers tightly clenched around her arms, burying her fingernails in her flesh to counteract the terrible itching and burning sensation. When unable to stand it any longer, she would leave the room....then return again to her part.

"The affliction had spread all over her body, and was particularly bad on the abdomen. Modesty, the foremost characteristic of her whole life from childhood days, sealed her lips, and she could not speak of this to others....She would use hot towels and almost scald herself to relieve this terrible itch....At times she would roll on the floor, with difficulty, suppressing groans of pain and anguish....Her suffering in church while playing [the organ] at divine service was almost worse, for with her hands at the keyboard, she could not put them in her sleeves....With heroic effort she had to suppress all that until services were over. Then she would almost run to the convent to get relief."

Yet, on February 20, 1924, she wrote to her mother, "Don't worry about me. I'm not so very sick. God seems to be more pleased to have me this way, so I am, too. One always [experiences] a certain happiness and satisfaction in feeling that God is satisfied to have

us well or not so well. I have been teaching right along, so you see it's not so bad at all." It was, to repeat, Sister Annella's firm desire to remain teaching since she knew that the motherhouse was short of teachers and the long Holy Week services were approaching.

Her superior, realizing that she would never request relief, finally ordered her to go to St. Alexius Hospital for treatments. As soon as she obtained any slight relief, however, she would return to her duties, and soon her condition was as bad as before the treatments. Finally, on the Saturday before Palm Sunday, it was decided that she must remain in the hospital until cured.

The treatments which were advised for her in this early stage of her illness consisted principally of hot baths in various solutions, lasting from three to five hours each. An ice-bag was propped on her head to cool her face, and food was given to her in the tub to keep up her strength. After these baths, her whole body was rubbed with ointment and she was put to bed. She seldom slept for more than a few hours, however, and always awoke with a severe itching attack.

Yet she was cheerful throughout these taxing treatments, and remained resigned to God's will. She wrote to Sister Ignatia at Easter, 1924, "I have not been very well for some time, and am in the hospital a little more than two weeks. Some skin trouble which they cannot do much for; I am not really sick, though, only a little weak." After more experimentation, the physicians saw that her condition was really not improving, and decided to send her to a clinic of skin specialists in Minneapolis. Her superior, Sister Magdalen, accompanied Sister Annella there in the latter part of April, 1924.

In Minneapolis, Sister Annella became the object of much scientific curiosity. The skin specialists called in several colleagues to examine, what was obvious to them then, a rare type of skin disease. These examinations lasted several days, during which Sister Annella stayed at St. Bernard's Convent in St. Paul. She expressed herself as being "tired of becoming a sideshow." These examinations were, moreover, humiliating for her, since she was questioned closely as to the possibility that the disease was brought on by immorality on her part, or that of her parents.

There were a number of sisters from her class at St. Bernard's at this time, and Sister Ignatia wrote, "one of them opened the door for the sisters, greeted the nurse who accompanied Sister Annella, then bowed silently to [her], whom she did not recognize. The other sisters came in and acted in a similar manner until Sister, feeling a little hurt about it, commenced to speak to someone near her. At the sound of Sister Annella's voice, one of the sisters, who had been with Sister when they were aspirants, turned and looked at her, and asked, 'Are you Sister Annella?' On being told that it was Sister Annella, the sister burst into tears, and all were much affected by this news."

A piece of flesh was taken from her abdomen during the examinations (with a punch, as it proved too thick to cut) and tested at the University Hospital. The exact nature of the disease was impossible to diagnose, the physicians said, though it seemed to resemble a rare Oriental disease; they advised her to return to Bismarck and continue the usual treatments.

Sister Annella stayed with Sister De' Pazzi, who had been sent to Sacred Heart Convent, Sauk Rapids, Minnesota, for a few days before

her return to Bismarck; here began a series of "home remedies" to try to comfort her. She also visited St. Benedict's for a few days, where she saw her sister Cecilia several times. After her return to Bismarck, her condition was visibly much worse. On May 5, she wrote to Sister Ignatia, "It feels good to be back, and the doctors have the satisfaction of my [having seen] a specialist (several, in fact), and are also satisfied to continue the former treatment since, though a very slow cure, the specialist says he can do no more than our own doctors for me. I surely am a queer-looking piece of humanity, spots, blotches, scales (not do-re-mi), and skin more like an animal than anything else. [One] sister...said since I complain of my skin being so tight, they could graft [on] a little alligator skin!... In the morning I seem like one in a stupor. You see, my skin itches so at night and therefore keeps me awake. It is not contagious, therefore not dangerous, so don't be afraid to get it!"

The letter continues in the hand of another sister. "I am...sitting in the bathroom beside the bath-tub watching Sister Annella float in soda-water...She has a rubber pillow under her head and a blanket drawn over the top of the tub. Yesterday she was in the tub five hours, and all the scabs came off....She is as brown as an Indian, with the exception of her face. Her skin is tight and dry-looking. She has scarcely any eyelashes. She just remarked that she doesn't know where her face begins [or] ends. The doctors are doing all in their power to relieve her, but the case is a peculiar one....She said that you should not worry."

As her suffering increased, her parents were called. They left for Bismarck immediately, in the middle of May, 1924. The account of this visit follows in Mr. Zervas's own words, "Reaching the hospital, and being led to Sister's room, [her parents] found no one in. A side door opened and a strange person walked in, dressed in a bath-

robe—her figure was bent over, her face swollen so that her nose looked broad, her eyes swollen...almost shut, and walking toward them with great difficulty. There were no eyelashes nor eyebrows to be seen on that face.

"Shocked and surprised, the visitors were about to excuse themselves [for] having entered the wrong room, when this person, who looked to be over forty years of age, burst into tears and in a youthful voice cried out, 'Don't you know me?'

"Yes, that was Sister Annella's clear, melodious voice—those were her regular, even teeth—noticeable when she spoke and cried. What a sad meeting! The parents did not recognize their own child. What a terrible change this sickness had wrought in her; what suffering must she have had to endure.

"After the shock of this first meeting was over, Sister Annella showed her usual keen interest in others by inquiring after those at home. She even joked about her illness, saying of her severe itching attacks, when she would have to scratch for a long time (and even asked her mother to assist her) in order to get relief, 'See, I am playing a ukulele!'

"Her parents," continues her father, "were highly edified by her composure, her resignation to her condition....her joyful bearing of her affliction sent by a loving providence. They remained with her two days, and had many good laughs at Sister's witty remarks."

After having visited Sister Annella, her parents reported her condition to Sister Ignatia and her superior at Wahpeton, North Dakota. Sister Ignatia was consequently sent on May 31, the day after the close of the school year, to be of comfort to her sister in Bismarck. "I will never forget the sight that met me on walking into her room," Sister

Ignatia wrote. "I had resolved to face her without showing the least surprise. But when I saw a face that was almost twice the size of [that of] any human being, and eyes that were almost closed because of the swelling, I simply caught a hold of her hand and tried to say in a steady voice, 'How are you, Sister dear?' Still holding her hand, which was also swollen, dark red, and sore, I dropped into a chair near her bed. Sister simply said, 'Oh, Mary,' and that was all."

During the time Sister Ignatia was with her sister at Bismarck, she often sat with her during her long baths. She wrote, "The water was extremely hot, as I often had to test it to keep the temperature even. Soda was added to relieve the smarting and burning. The extreme heat was to force perspiration, which had ceased entirely some months before. Sister suffered from stinging pains from the pores of her body. She remarked [that] the pain was as though the pores were trying to function but could not....Sister had another companion in her room. This made it hard for [her], because she often screamed and paced the floor in agony, and the very thought that she was disturbing an elderly sister, who was also in pain, made her nervous, and this increased the itching.

"Any disturbance of the nervous system aggravated her condition. She could not endure heat without increased itching, and being with another sometimes made it very hard to regulate the temperature.... [She] would always ask if it was satisfactory to her companion to create a draft by opening the transom and window; if not, she would quietly put up with conditions." Her skin was now a deep red-brown all over, and began to secrete regularly.

Further experimentation was done. The vein in Sister Annella's upper arm was opened from time to time and arsenic injected directly into the blood stream. This operation was very painful, and usually made her very ill for days afterwards. Another method of training

was nearly fatal. A salve containing carbolic acid had been used on her hands, and proved quite successful, so the doctors ordered the entire body covered with it and bandaged tightly. The nurses in attendance began with the left arm, and by the time they were finished (about an hour later), Sister Annella had fallen asleep.

Happy that she seemed to be getting some relief (for she never slept without hypodermic injections), the nurses took no special notice of her drowsiness. Before they departed, however, the sister in charge noticed the strange appearance of Sister's face, and felt for her pulse, which was barely discernible. The doctors were notified of this condition, and they ordered the salve removed at once. It was late in the evening before Sister Annella regained consciousness.

She continued to manifest her interest in the spiritual welfare of others. As Sister Ignatia records, "Sister tried to influence a young nurse who attended her to be careful of her companions. [She] told me she felt the girl was good but weak. This nurse was sometimes moody, but Sister always tried to cheer her up, even when the nurse was at times rude and unkind to [her]....Finally [she] thought it might be her special case that annoyed the nurse, so [she] asked the sister who supervised that floor to make a change, if the nurse preferred it. (This meant much to [her], as each new nurse had to learn by experience how to help [her].) Strange to say, although I, her own sister, felt a nausea come over me when seeing her feet, which were swollen, blistered, and fairly oozing with [secretion], this nurse asked to keep Sister as her patient. Sister remarked this to me, and tried to be especially grateful and kind to this nurse."

From her sick-bed, Sister Annella wrote, in May, 1924, to "dearest Mamma...You seemed to be so sorry about my not being able to pray....But this is not always the case. And when I am unable to do

so, have asked our Blessed Lord to take my sufferings and offer them for me, and I really don't feel that God wants me to pray if He doesn't give me the ability, and especially since I have advice from [my confessor] in this regard, I feel more satisfied. Before that I used to worry about it myself."

It was decided, finally, to make a last attempt to discover some cure for the disease at the world-famous center of medicine, Rochester, Minnesota. Sister Ignatia asked to pack her sister's trunk in case she would not return for a long time. "I found," she wrote, "[that] she had very little outside of worn clothing, letters from home which I destroyed, as I felt they were for her alone, and a few gifts she had received from our parents. Quite accidentally I dropped a remark about some things of [hers], and she immediately asked if her trunk was being packed. I told her it was, but she did not ask where she was going, only remark[ed], 'The trip to Minneapolis was very hard, and I was only worse when I came back.' When we told her that she was to be taken to Rochester, she was very quiet and calm about it, accepting the decision in obedience."

At **Mayo Clinic Hospital – Rochester**, suffering and hope meet every day. If you are caring for someone you love, waiting for answers, or serving as a doctor or nurse, know this: you are not alone.

Sister Annella shows us how to unite our pain with Jesus, and the Guild is praying for you. Let us walk with you. Share your prayer intentions and receive updates about retreats, prayer gatherings, and Masses. Sign up at sisterannella.org.

At 7 p.m. on June 8, Pentecost Sunday, Sisters Annella, Ignatia, and Magdalen left for Rochester by train. In Fargo, Mr. and Mrs. Zervas met and accompanied them to Detroit, Minnesota. Sister Annella seemed cheerful at this stage of the journey, despite the great heat; an ice-pack alleviated the itch on her back, though it continued on her arms and legs. Her sister, Sister De' Pazzi, accompanied her from St. Cloud to St. Paul. From the latter city, however, conditions were vastly more unpleasant. There was not time to obtain anything but a glass of buttermilk for Sister Annella there, and she was growing weak from the strain of the trip.

Moreover, no compartment was available on the train to Rochester, and she was placed in an open chair-car, occupied by many other passengers as well. She looked badly, and the evident curiosity of the other passengers caused her no small discomfort. It was, besides, very warm in the car, and this brought on a severe itching attack. She found it necessary to scratch her face, and it began to bleed. She became almost hysterical, and began to cry, "What will those people think of a nun acting and looking as I do?" "We told her we could remove something about her head and make her more comfortable without the passengers noticing it," Sister Ignatia wrote, "but she feared to draw more attention and perhaps scandalize those around us."

She then asked Sister Ignatia if they might go to the dressing room, where she might have some privacy. In order to do this, she had to pass through the entire length of the car, and her feet were very sore; she was so weak that the jolting of the train almost threw her down. "I knew only too well what it meant to her," Sister Magdalen wrote. "She was so reserved, and to have to travel as she was!.... Certainly no one knew [all that] she went through except the One for Whom she suffered."

Sister Ignatia left her in the dressing room for a few moments, near an open window, while she stepped out of the door to ask the porter for a glass of cold water for her. When she returned, she noticed an agonized expression on her sister's face as she stood with both hands on the open window. Sister Annella repeated, "I can't stand it any longer, Sister!"

But her suffering only increased intensity until the group arrived in Rochester. Two ladies on the train offered to drive the sisters to the clinic upon arrival, and helped spare her a waiting period with fifty or more patients by arranging to have her examined at once by the head of the department of dermatology and his assistants. About a year later, Sister Annella admitted to Sister Ignatia that she recognized that only a great gift of grace from God kept her from throwing herself out that open window on the train in a time of most painful suffering.

8

The weeks at Rochester only served to prove the rarity and apparent hopelessness of Sister Annella's case. The preliminary examination, which lasted nearly three hours, confirmed it at once. She was asked to don a surgical gown in place of her religious habit upon arrival at the clinic. The place where she had stood while dressing was marked with a deep layer of exfoliated skin which resembled artificial snow. These particles were not soft and pliable like live skin, but dry and crisp; the physician in charge of the examination called them to the attention of his assistants.

When the diagnosis began, large medical tones were brought in to verify facts. "This amused Sister Annella," Sister Ignatia wrote, "and she laughingly remarked, as all the doctors withdrew to hold

a consultation, that the one doctor in his white gown reminded her of a server [at Mass], holding [a] large volume up against his forehead for support while the others paged through it, now and then remarking something in Latin terms."

It was decided that the case was so unusual that it required a more complete and regulated examination, including X-rays, over a period of time. The disease, the attending physician remarked, did not correspond to the diagnosis of any one skin disease, though later it was stated that its resemblance to Pityriasis Rubra Pilaris, "a chronic inflammatory skin disease beginning in patches and gradually invading the whole body, characterized by a deep red-colored, exfoliating skin, and hard conical elevations resembling gooseflesh," was not slight; but even this disease was not believed to render its bearer unfit for work nor miserably attacked by itching. Not more than six cases were on record in the United States at that time, it was said, which had any marked resemblance to Sister Annella's.

She was placed in the Worrel Hospital, where all skin diseases were then treated. This was an added discomfiture for her, who had hoped that she might be permitted to stay in St. Mary's, a Catholic hospital. She was hurried to a comfortable room in the hospital, but, being very weak, was put to bed immediately. Her companions were not allowed to spend any more time with her. Although she was alarmed at the thought of being left with complete strangers so soon, she tried not to show her feelings, and only begged her companions to find a priest who would be able to administer Holy Communion to her.

Arrangements were made that same evening with a chaplain, but it should be noted that they were not especially pleasing to one who loved the Blessed Sacrament as Sister Annella did; she was able to receive the Sacrament only twice or three times a week, and

on first Fridays. "But many times," Sister Ignatia affirmed, "before the chaplain reached this hospital, which was the seventh one he visited, the nurses [had] insisted that Sister take her breakfast, as it would not be served after nine o'clock. Then if the chaplain came and found that Sister was not fasting, he would not come again the next time, as he thought the same thing would happen. Sister felt this very much, as she had only these two or three days in the week to look forward to. Sunday services did not allow them to make the hospital rounds."

It was revealed later that the supervisor on Sister Annella's floor of the hospital had had to use all her authority to induce a nurse to take care of Sister, and dress her bleeding and secreting skin. Some of the nurses, in particular, made it evident that they felt a repulsion towards her by taking care not to touch her when administering medicines, or by handling her roughly and hurriedly. Moreover, the nurses were changed every two weeks, and this necessitated a new explanation by the poor sufferer of what should be done and how.

Most remarkable of all, in the light of these conditions, is the charitable interest which Sister Annella took in all those who were around her. "She was especially kind," Sister Ignatia wrote, "to the poorer and less well instructed classes of persons....She became interested in the lives of those she met, and dropped many a word here and there that led up to a discussion [and] some words of advice. Many persons older than herself came in to talk on certain matters, especially of moral importance. Sister had a frank, direct way of dealing with people. She was very firm in what she knew to be right, never considering persons, nor catering to anyone....A lady came in every morning to do up Sister's room. The matter of religion came up for discussion, and Sister learned [that] the woman was a Catholic, but knew very little about her religion.

"Sister began to interest herself in this regard, and finally learned that this poor woman and her husband had never heard Mass as long as they had been employed there....Not knowing enough about the Mass, they left after the sermon every Sunday morning. This ignorant woman called this the 'Last Gospel,' and as she came in before the Mass could possibly be over, Sister surmised that something was wrong. The fact that Holy Communion was always distributed before Mass [because there were so many invalids and convalescents in Rochester] threw her off regarding the parts of the Mass, and she would receive and stay until the sermon was preached, and then leave."

Sister Annella's constant cheerfulness and good humor surprised and amused the nurses and doctors. She was also very exact in obeying the orders of the doctors. "She was told to eat a little of everything on her tray," Sister Ignatia wrote. "Her diet consisted of vegetables, fruit, milk, cereals, and a sea-food called 'agar-agar,' which she disliked very much, but which was found in nearly every dish in some form or another. Sister always obeyed and tasted, at least, every dish, though I remember seeing her shudder as she swallowed. She never cared much for vegetables, but now she tried her best to overcome this dislike."

Once while speaking of her illness, she said, "I am glad I am here where the doctors can see that I am really sick, because I have been told for years that I am imagining things whenever I complain." She was referring, of course, to her painful stomach ailment, which was written down to imagination in spite of the fact that she experienced a burning sensation with almost every mouthful of food she ever ate.

There was little improvement in her condition, however. She had been bothered by much discharge from her ears, and her pulse was always 150 or 160. Her skin became so sensitive that water

barely tepid seemed scalding hot. Yet sometimes the converse occurred. On June 1, Sister Ignatia wrote, "She looked very bad to me; a sort of grayish purple spread over her face, and she shook violently—because she was so cold, she said. But it was very warm in the room. I got her hot water packs and covered her up, but her teeth just chattered."

When the period of examination was over, she was sent to St. Raphael's Hospital, St. Cloud, in the company of a Benedictine nurse. Sister Ignatia returned to her convent at Wahpeton by way of Moorhead, to inform her parents of Sister Annella's condition, and the increase of suffering she was undergoing.

On Monday, July 28, her parents left for St. Cloud to see Sister Annella, and afterwards called on Mother Louise Walz, the reverend mother at St. Benedict's, to hear her decision as to what could be done next for their common daughter. It cannot be over-estimated, unequivocally in this matter, that several important considerations influenced the decision made at this time. For one thing, while it was reasonably certain that the disease was not contagious, it was obvious that Sister Annella required constant and very exacting care, and that any failure to provide this care increased her sufferings immeasurably, and with them decreased her chance for recovery.

The doctors had, in addition, recommended as absolutely essential a change of location, a more leisurely and healthful routine, with plenty of freedom, fresh air, and a removal of such restrictions as would forbid her achieving some relief by scratching, temperature alteration, and the like. Accordingly, Mr. and Mrs. Zervas put the suggestion to the reverend mother that they might take their daughter home for a period of time, and give her exactly the type of care prescribed, which could not, obviously, be given in the convents of the community, nor even, in point of fact, in an ordinary hospital.

The reverend mother regarded this charitable offer favorably; she obtained the permission of the Bishop of St. Cloud for this move, and granted her own permission in writing for Sister Annella to be taken to her home in Moorhead. Although this might seem to have been permission of a strange sort, it was not actually so, and no one familiar with the facts of the case could possibly misrepresent it. It was, under the circumstances, the only, and best, thing to be done. The original permission was, it should also be remembered, temporary, for a period of six months; when Sister Annella's condition had improved gratifyingly at the end of that time, it seemed advisable to renew the permission and permit her to stay where the improvement was made.

Sister Annella herself was pained beyond words at the thought of leaving her "convent home," as she was fond of calling it, but accepted her reverend mother's decision in obedience. The change in no way altered her religious status; as a matter of fact, because it was made in obedience to a superior's command, it was an act of virtue which few religious are ever called upon to perform. The reverend mother made a special effort to keep herself apprized of all changes in Sister Annella's condition, often daily in the last months of Sister's life; she often offered to send members of the community to aid Sister Annella, and those at the local convent in Moorhead were frequent visitors, and looked upon Sister Annella, they often said, as a member of their community.

A check was sent by the reverend mother to Mr. Zervas to help defray medical expenses which mounted daily, but, as he wrote he wished that this money be kept for some extraordinary necessity; as this necessity never came, the money was used to purchase a chalice after Sister Annella's death, which was then presented to

the Sacred Heart Chapel at St. Benedict's, where it is in use to this day in offering the Blood of Christ to His Father.

Finally, the nature of this move was also understood in Rome. Sister Annella received, sometime later, in the company of a large reliquary cross containing a relic of the True Cross and many other precious relics, a document in the hand of a cardinal, expressing the wish that the cross might serve as a consolation to her in her sorrow over being deprived of regular community life, and requesting that the cross "remain in the family after Sister Annella leaves."¹² She was often amused at the ambiguity of the cardinal's verb, and would turn to her mother and say, "You know, Mamma, what that means."



CHAPTER THREE

1924-1926

1

Sister Annella's illness forbids exact chronicling. It is possible, in general terms, to trace a slight improvement in her condition from early winter of 1924 to November of 1925, and then a regression to her death in August, 1926; but the various phases of her disease cannot be treated in any strictly logical order. Moreover, an added difficulty is present. Complete as the available accounts seem to be, there are a greater number of things which will never be known about her sufferings simply because she herself did not choose to reveal them, and usually made no attempt to describe her sufferings. And many attendant physicians, by their own admission, could not adequately account for them.

The least that must be said about the nature of the disease, then, is that it was a complex combination of afflictions. The probable reason that no single diagnosis ever satisfied the physicians is the fact that such a combination of afflictions was inexplicable in terms of a single disease; as will be shown later, Sister Annella suffered in every one of her senses, and could obtain little relief from her agony. Contradictory or general diagnoses were all that could be obtained. A recent opinion, incidentally, that the disease was a form of Japanese leprosy, is not satisfactory.¹ And the possibility that

the disease was one of “supernatural” complexity was mentioned more frequently as it progressed; certainly the happenings of the last week of her life lend some authority to such a view.



The wisdom of moving Sister Annella to her home was borne out by later events. She proved a constant and complex care, such as would have proven immensely difficult, to say no more, to handle in company with other patients.

She was put to bed in an upstairs room in her family’s home in Moorhead, and everything was done to make her as comfortable as possible. It is notable that for several months previous to moving her to Moorhead, Mrs. Zervas had been suffering from a severe case of physical indisposition; one would have assumed that the first trying days of caring for Sister Annella, during which her mother had no sleep whatsoever, would have aggravated her suffering. Actually the opposite proved true, and Mrs. Zervas wrote, “Our Lord seemingly provided the mother with strength to take care of her sick child and His sick bride.”

It must be assumed that no lengthy discussion of the role of suffering in the spiritual life of the Christian is needed in this study.² The philosophical point is a simple one: that God is in no way the cause of moral evil, since that is privation of the good that is divinely willed and due in its place, and is the cause of physical evil only as that comes about in the working of created nature.

Yet the physical evil of suffering is not good in itself, and it is theology which shows us, pre-eminently from the passion of Christ, how suffering can be a loving cooperation of man with God in the consummation of His redemptive love. Because Christ chose

suffering and death, instrumentally, to save the world, His saints choose to “partake in the sufferings of Christ [1 Peter 4: 13].” But the saints do not wish suffering to others; they see it only for what it is in the context of Redemption: a treasure, an invitation to their personal growth in love.

“Sickness no less than health,” St. Alphonsus Rodriguez wrote, “is a gift of God. He sends it to us in order to try our virtue or to correct our faults; to manifest to us our weakness or to disabuse us of an exaggerated esteem of ourselves; to detach us from the love of earthly objects and sensual pleasures; to mortify our impetuous ardor, and to weaken the power of the flesh, our greatest enemy; to remind us that we are here below in a land of exile and that heaven is our true home; to secure to us, in short, all the advantages which can be derived from this trial, if accepted with gratitude and as a special favor...I call the time of sickness the touchstone of virtue, for it is then we discover the real value of the virtues possessed by a soul. If she supports this trial without disquietude, without complaint, without excessive desires of health, in perfect obedience to the physicians and superiors; if she remains tranquil, entirely resigned to the will of God: that is an indication that she is solidly grounded in virtue.”³

That Sister Annella’s attitude of resignation and obedience was in accord with this saint’s sentiments will be established, I hope, in this chapter.

2

Painful attacks of itching, of increased intensity, occurred to discomfort Sister Annella at least six or seven times each day; during these attacks she was forced to rise and pace the floor, scratching, weeping, and suffering great agony. Any extremes of

temperature brought them on at once; even an electric fan made it too cold for her, and on windy days she suffered greatly. Her body was becoming terribly swollen, and secreted continually; one type of secretion was a watery substance which seemed to burn her.

The swelling extended to her face also, and made eating and drinking very painful. Her once-luminous blue eyes were now faded to a dull gray. When asked how she felt during these frequent attacks, she replied, "I feel as if hot steam were blown against me, and as if I were put into a press with such pressure that I can hardly breathe, as if the blood is coming through the pores and cannot get through." Other sharp pains were like "electric sparks," she said.

It was early feared that the severity of these attacks, and the intensity of the suffering they caused her, would drive her insane, a fear repeated many times by those who saw her in agony. This did not occur, however; she remained in full command of her mental faculties until the end of her life, and even manifested a strangely acute perception, a source of great astonishment to those who saw and spoke with her. She never showed excessive worry over her illness or the prospect of a cure, and never once asked to be cured. At the end of an attack, she was heard to say, "Thank God it is over; I hope I have the strength to bear the next one."

Upon being told that God would bless her for her sufferings, she said, "It is a blessing that I can suffer this; I could not do so myself if God did not give me the strength." She was told to make an offering of her sufferings to God, and she replied, "That has been done right from the start; I feared that the pain might become so great that I might forget to make an offering of it, so I gave it all to the Blessed Virgin to take care of for me, so that nothing of it would be lost." She resigned herself completely to God's will, for a cure or the continuation of the disease, entirely as it pleased Him.

From the very beginning of her illness Sister Annella was obliged to submit to a galaxy of proposed remedies, some medical, others "home remedies." Few did much good, though fortunately no great harm either. A particularly unpleasant remedy was tried in the summer of 1925, when she was packed from head to foot in a poultice made from spoiled apples. Soothing medicines were often prescribed to deaden the force of the pain, but her parents were later advised to give her no more of them, as it was obvious that the disease was not transient, and such medicines would only weaken the nerves and prevent nature from throwing off the poisonous matter in her system.

Instead, osteopathic treatments were given to revive and increase nerve activity and blood circulation. When these treatments did produce some improvement, a remark was made to Sister Annella that in the future she might wish to have this meritorious disease over again; she replied, "When this disease leaves me, God will have taken it away and He will not want me to have it anymore. I do not want anything but what God wills. Once I was free from this at Bismarck. Thinking that I had not carried my illness as God wanted me to, I went into the chapel and told Our Lord that if He wanted me to have it over again, I would carry it as He would want me to. It came back with redoubled force. No, if it leaves me, He will have taken it."

This, then, was her attitude, one of full submission to the dispensations of Providence. Some remedies did indeed bring her momentary relief; others only increased her suffering. The application of plantain leaves, for example, opened the pores of her skin, which had been closed for months, and removed some poisonous matter with large, thorn-like objects formed by the solidification of secretions there. Combined with osteopathic treatment, such care seemed beneficial.

But greater suffering followed. "It seems," her mother wrote, "[that] she suffered death seven or eight times a day, only...it did not come to an end." Huge boils formed on the back of her neck and on her cheek near the jaw. An eyewitness affirmed, "They were as large as a lemon." Soon boils formed all over her body. Her father wrote, "Her arms looked like knotted canes. On the side of her face it happened that the boils became so large that it looked likely enough [that] that side of her face [would] come off when the covering was removed...Sister Annella moaned with pain when the cloth was removed." Throughout the long period of great pain from these secretions, the most painful of which came from behind her ears, the attacks of itching recurred with regularity.

Some tablets were left by a Benedictine nurse from St. Raphael's Hospital, St. Cloud, to be given to Sister Annella if her pains proved too severe. Once, in great pain, Sister inquired about these tablets. Told that they were to ease the pain, she said, "If that is all they are for, I don't want any. I can stand the pain." "She never asked to be relieved from pain," her father recorded. "She only asked for the strength to bear it. She also expressed her great joy in the consolation that she had not brought this sickness on herself."

But her greatest consolation was the daily reception of Holy Communion, administered by her pastor or his assistant. As a rule, she would fall into a deep sleep after Communion, a sleep lasting for two or three hours. Once she slept so long and lay so motionless that it was feared that she had died. Her body was rigid and her feet cold. When the feet were warmed by rubbing, and by the application of a hot water bottle, she awoke with a loud scream, and a terrible attack of itching seized her entire body. Usually she suffered from sleeplessness, and even in these brief periods when she was able to sleep, her body, even and especially her face, would twitch pitifully.

She was constantly cheerful in her sufferings. This fact was attested by the nuns of the local convent. When it was said to her that some day she would be very happy for having suffered thus, she seemed completely surprised, and answered, "But I am happy right now!"

She also showed a great interest in things around her, and always desired to help those who were trying to help her. From the end of August, 1924, she did fine embroidery and crocheting. Wearing a loose garment to avoid pressure and irritation to her skin, she busied herself between attacks; when one would come upon her, without warning, she dropped everything and began to pace the floor to secure relief. Moaning and wringing her hands, crying bitterly, she would await the end of the attack. When it had subsided, she would resume her needle-work calmly, though bathed in perspiration, and as if nothing had happened.

Small particles of skin fell wherever she went; these were thick enough to receive the impression of footprints. They made her very uncomfortable in bed, and she developed a dexterous, two-handed movement of whisking them onto the floor. Although her flesh was hard and dry, her body never stopped secreting. "Sister Annella would call her mother's attention to the fact that she could pinch her arm or other parts of her body and squeeze [secretion] out of the pores of the skin," her father wrote.

The "pilares," or hard pore-formations resembling thorns about one-fourth of an inch long and varying in width from that of a horse-hair to that of the lead in an ordinary lead-pencil, very hard and sharp, kept her from enjoying any real rest. When it was discovered that adhesive tape removed them, a large strip of tape, about five inches in width, covered with salve, was placed on her back from the nape of the neck to the base of the spine; this tape was

pulled off rapidly, and the heavy ends of these “pilares” stuck to the tape, giving it the appearance of a brush. Sister Annella said that removing them was like “pulling tacks”; the task required about two hours, and new ones appeared no later than twenty-four hours after the first had been removed.

3

But some improvement did come to Sister Annella. As early as September 21, 1924, she wrote to Sister De’ Pazzi, “Last week, I weighed ninety-nine pounds. Yesterday...I found I had gained two and a half pounds in a week, making it one hundred one and a half. I think I must have weighed about ninety-five pounds or less until the last few weeks, when I have been able to eat better...I hope I can soon get to church. But God knows best. He has given me many privileges as it is....I surely can’t complain....I wonder if I’ll know how to begin to teach if that time ever comes. It seems so very long since I gave those last lessons. Well, in God’s good time all will turn out well.”

She began to go out of doors for short periods of time; later in the fall, she was able to take long walks with her sister Cecilia, stopping for rests at St. Ansgar’s Hospital. About the tenth of October, she put on her religious habit and went to the local convent to receive Holy Communion with the sisters at seven o’clock in the morning, in their chapel. On October 15, the feast of St. Teresa of Avila, she heard Mass again for the first time in six or seven months, but had to remain in a chapel of St. Joseph’s Church on account of her itching. She kept up these visits for some time, though at great inconvenience.

To a sister in religion who was also suffering much, she wrote on November 5, “I was so surprised to receive your loving letter, and more surprised to find how much interest you have taken in me,

and how much sisterly charity you have exercised in my regard. I cannot say how grateful I am for all this. God alone can reward you sufficiently, and I beg Him to do so both here and hereafter.... I am feeling much better."

Throughout spring and summer of 1925, there was a slow but manifest improvement in her condition. Her fingernails, eyebrows, and eyelashes came back at this time, and her hair grew so thick that it had to be cut. She was also gaining weight, to a total of one hundred twenty-nine pounds, and expressed the fear that she might become too heavy. Her appetite had returned, and she was able to eat ordinary food, with the exception of anything that created heat, since such food brought on attacks of itching. It seemed, at this point, that a complete cure was just a matter of time.

However, her body never came back to normal condition. Her skin remained dry, of a purplish color, and her eyes were still swollen and secreting, so that cotton had to be used to protect her headress. The "pilares" remained, and were removed with tape or needles. Her boils were no longer so numerous, but the exfoliation of skin went on. Sunbaths were advised, but discontinued when it was learned that she could not remain for any long time in the sun; extremes of temperature, both hot and cold, as has already been remarked, always caused severe attacks. She was still afflicted with a burning sensation in her stomach, which had appeared so early in her life; she never secured relief from it. She said, "It is not like a burning caused by sourness of stomach, but like a flame burning, going higher and higher up into my throat." X-ray and other examinations never disclosed a reason for this suffering.

At Christmas, 1924, Sister Annella attended Midnight Mass. During that winter she went out a little every day, also in the spring and summer of 1925. She felt so much improved, in fact, that she hoped

she could return to teaching in the fall. About this time, perhaps in late spring of 1925, her father wrote a letter to Brother André, C.S.C., of Montreal, founder of the Shrine of St. Joseph and subsequently widely known for the holiness of his life, to ask his advice on making a trip to the shrine with Sister Annella. The answer which Mr. Zervas received from Brother André discouraged the trip; this letter has not been found, and no record of the correspondence exists at Montreal.⁴

The heat of the summer of 1925 made Sister Annella very uncomfortable at times, but it was hoped that cooler weather would bring a more lasting improvement in her condition. It was on a visit to Moorhead, in the summer of 1925, that Sister Ignatia was reminded by Sister Annella, "Mary, do you remember when you told me I would have to go to Purgatory for not cleaning the sink properly? Well, I am right *in* slime now. How I hated it!"

Sister Annella took her pen during this time to help and comfort others. On January 25, 1925, she wrote to a nun in the novitiate, "Your letter [led] me to think that you have no desire but to live in God's service the rest of your life....I have prayed for you, and shall pray that our heavenly Bridegroom may make you His very own by holy vows this coming summer....If you feel happy now, this day will be one of a great and holy happiness which comes from knowing you belong entirely to Jesus. I thank you very much for your kind prayers for me, also your good wishes. Everyone has been extremely kind to me during my illness. So much so, in fact, that I sometimes fear my merit in my sufferings is not very great....I only hope our dear Lord has not been disappointed in me, and that His design in my sickness has not been interfered with in any way. He has no doubt had some very special reason for all this, and I hope and trust He will bring all to the end He wishes it to come to."

On May 17, 1925, she wrote to a sister who was ill, "God did not see fit to answer the Little Flower's prayer with a sudden cure. What He has yet in store for me I do not know, but all He does is well, so [there is] no need to worry. God has given me the grace to be resigned, and I thank Him heartily for this, as also for all else He has given me with my illness....I often wonder what great harm of body or soul I may have suffered had God not given this 'blessing in disguise.'"

On July 11, 1925, Sister Ignatia pronounced her simple perpetual vows. Her sister wrote to her, "I know you will have a pleasant and truly happy day, and, too, that you will be satisfied that none of us came down [to St. Benedict's]. Papa could hardly decide not to, because he thought you would feel badly. But I think you understand....Thanks to your prayers, I have felt better again this week....the redness is leaving my face."

To Sister De' Pazzi, on August 15, 1925, she wrote, "I really marvel at how well I feel in spite of the hot days. I have an idea that it will not be long before I can go to work again. At least I expect to do a little something. Oh, Sister, I will be so glad!....My home is not here any more, and I feel it....I feel almost ashamed to say so, but you can imagine how, after nine years in the convent, one feels to be out for over a year. I feel like a fish out of water....But God permitted this for some special purpose (in fact, I think I can see now different designs He had in all that happened since I took sick, and there are perhaps many more which I do not see!) I only hope that I have not in any way interfered with His purpose....I have never yet trusted in vain, so why have fear?....May our Blessed Lady assist you in making your work and sufferings a worthy preparation for your perpetual consecration to Jesus."

On one hot Saturday, somewhat later, having gone to confession with her mother, Sister Annella was forced to rush out of the church

because she felt a severe attack coming on. Tears were streaming down her face, not so much because of the pain of the attack as because she thought she might have shown a bad example by leaving the church in such haste. Thereafter her attendance at Mass had to be less frequent, and soon she could no longer make the trip, though she continued to receive Holy Communion at her home.

In early autumn of 1925, she wrote to Sister Ignatia, "I still run a temperature, and my skin is very annoying....although it really does not look so very bad. Oh well, an end will come sometime, when God wills it so....I hope you will not have to suffer [from hay-fever] again as last year....I know [mother] worries about me somewhat, and I am afraid I can do little to help that. You see, she tries so hard to help me, and all seems of no avail. It isn't very encouraging, that is sure....Well, so it goes: one has this, another that, and in the end it matters little which cross was ours, unless it be that the greater one brings the greater reward in heaven."

She wrote about the same time to Sister De' Pazzi, "I am happy to know [that] I am being given an opportunity [to fulfill] God's holy will, and at the same time perhaps having a part of my purgatory here....I don't feel able for much....sometimes. I was really feeling much better last year. But then a change may come, and if not, God knows best. His holy will is mine."

4

When a definite relapse in Sister Annella's condition came, in November of 1925, care was exercised to retain what was fast being lost. The improvement to this time, which was not inconsiderable, led all to believe that the right course of treatment

had been followed. Still, Sister Annella refused any merely pain-alleviating medicines. Once when the doctors urged them, she said, "I vowed obedience to reverend mother, not to the doctors!" "It was in perfect harmony with Sister's desire," her father wrote, "to suffer as long as God willed it, and as He willed it, though the sight...of it was very painful to her parents."

The last stages of the terrible disease were in most respects more painful than the first. Her hands began to swell again, to double the normal size; she herself said, "They feel as if they will burst with a loud noise." The nails and palms of the hands from the forefinger to the center were split, and appeared to be rotting away. The flesh all over her body turned to a grayish white, and emitted "a sickening odor like rotted bones," peeling off "as if it had been cooked."

On her fingers were large blisters, from one joint to the other, filled with blood. Her feet were in a similar condition; the only way she could step on them was to pack them with cotton and walk on her heels or the sides of her feet. By swinging her hands or placing them in hot water, she could get a little relief from the excruciating pain. Her head and face were swollen; at times her eyes were nearly closed. Once when the eyelids appeared inside-out because of the swelling, she humorously remarked, "What will I do now, when I want to sleep, for I cannot close my eyes!"

Sister Annella's breathing was affected by the illness, and became very labored, as if in a state of suffocation. When able to walk, she would pace the floor, and was finally relieved when perspiring. A few hours afterwards, her whole body would be finely speckled with blood. This remained beneath the skin, and would exfoliate the following day. It was noticed that her appearance could change very suddenly; this fact was witnessed by members of her family as well as visitors. At times dark, pinched like a mummy, her face

could soon afterwards appear purplish and wider than the normal face. Once her mother prepared her for sleep, left her, and returned later. She was so horrified by the appearance of the figure, especially the swollen face, which looked like that of "a debauched old man, twisting vehemently," that she rushed downstairs and said tearfully, 'Sister Annella looks so terrible that I almost doubt it to be Sister.' Sister Annella herself noticed this fact. Once, on beholding herself in the mirror, she said, "Mamma, I look just like the devil."

New boils formed on her swollen body. Thick secretion flowed from her ears, down her face from her eyes and nose, and inside her mouth around the gums and under the tongue. A large swelling formed on the top of her head. She noticed it, of course, remarking that it felt like a cushion and caused a swaying feeling on her head. This swelling gradually rose conically, and felt, as she also remarked, thick and cap-like.

Her father recorded its removal. "While assisting Sister Annella at bathing, drying her head with a towel, her mother suddenly felt the top of Sister's head...move. A sickening feeling came over the mother, but something had to be done, so with a towel the mother lifted the mass, and—horrified—she held Sister Annella's entire scalp in her hands like a cap. 'What happened?' asked Sister Annella. 'It feels so cool on the top of my head.' Her mother did not like to tell her but Sister insisted, and when told, she asked to see it. Calmly observing her own scalp, she remarked, 'My isn't that queer? Here is the hair on top, and below are the roots of the hair.' She did not feel alarmed or nervous. This was her second growth of hair since her sickness began— and also the last."

Sister Annella refused to remain idle between her attacks. With light gloves on her sore hands, she continued her needle-work, which was remarkably perfect in execution. She also meditated on Sacred

Scripture and the lives of the saints, or sang hymns and parts of Vespers. Once her clear, melodious voice was heard singing hymns to the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin immediately after a very severe attack. She remained anxious to help her family and friends and whenever her opinion was asked, she gave clear and unbiased answers.

Yet about herself she was almost unconcerned, leaving all to the will of God. When asked about her inability to pray in the midst of suffering, she did not worry, but said, "I offer my sufferings as prayer. If God had wanted me to pray, He would have given me the ability." Similarly, when asked for prayers, she would invariably answer, "I will offer some of my suffering for you," indicating that she had consecrated all her sufferings to God as prayer.

Sister Annella had a great love for convent life and a great longing to return to it. She was often heard even in her sleep, singing Gregorian chants and parts of the Psalms. She was extremely careful about anything which came from her convent, and would not allow worn-out pieces of religious clothing to be discarded, but insisted that they should be mended, laundered, and used over again.

Sounds which formerly had given her much pleasure now became a source of irritation to her. The chirping of birds, squirrels in the trees, and other sounds annoyed her. A single exception was thunder, which seemed to please her. Yet, paradoxically, she remained calm, and never forgot to thank others for any service, even so slight a one as the straightening of her pillow. Her hearing was affected somewhat by the discharge from her ears, which proved another annoyance. Ordinary sounds, such as the church bell or human voices, become bitonal, one normal tone and the other a tone "of slightly higher pitch." To one who had such a keen musical ear

and was bothered by the slightest discord, this must have been an almost intolerable suffering.

For a long period of time particles of dry skin resembling bran exfoliated from her body daily. Those who witnessed it were astonished that her frail body could exfoliate so much skin (between a pint and a quart a day) and continue to grow more. From December, 1925, to her death, moreover, she was unable to take any amount of solid food, and depended upon an occasional glass of buttermilk for her nourishment. Her body became so sensitive that it was necessary to pack it in cotton.

A new type of secretion appeared early in 1926. "Early one morning," Mr. Zervas wrote, "her mother noticed on Sister's gown, over her chest, a vivid green fluid. Thinking that something had been spilled on Sister, she questioned her about it. Sister Annella replied that she did not know, nor had she been aware of it herself. When her gown and the cotton packing was removed, it was discovered that this greenish fluid was all over her chest and back, and especially under her arms. It was no pus-like discharge, but a green liquid, and was of such a sharp, biting, and decayed odor that Sister herself could hardly stand it. The discharge was so great that the thick layer of cotton was saturated, and it had also soaked through her gown. Previous to this, there had been for some time a shiny discharge on Sister's body of a yellowish or brownish color. This vivid green discharge was not shiny but liquid. It kept on....for some time, almost daily."

A Benedictine nurse from St. Raphael's Hospital, St. Cloud, was sent by Mother Louise to assist in the care of Sister Annella at this time. When the nurse arrived, Sister Annella seemed extraordinarily comfortable; her temperature returned to normal, and her attacks and discharges virtually left her. After two or three days of this, the

nurse left, seeing her patient so much improved. Sister Annella was mortified, and wept, saying, "Now that reverend mother has sent a nurse to help take care of me, it seems as if I were pretending to be sick – no fever, no itch – what will they think of me?"

No sooner, however, had the train which carried the nurse from Moorhead left the station, when Sister Annella's temperature rose, her attacks began, and she became violently ill again. Sometime later Mother Louise herself came to visit Sister Annella. This was in the evening, and the reverend mother made a special request to be present the following morning when Sister Annella was to be dressed, asking that nothing be removed until she came. The next morning, when her mother prepared Sister Annella's things for the change, Sister remarked, "Mamma, would it not be queer if, as usual, when there is someone here, nothing would show up?"

However, when the gown was removed, as well as the layer of cotton beneath it, in the presence of the reverend mother, it was found that the latter was saturated with bright red blood. Her body, chest, and back were examined, but no wound or opening could be found from which the blood could have come. "I am glad I came," Mother Louise remarked, "for I could hardly have believed this if I had not seen it with my own eyes."

All during late winter and spring of 1926, the number of boils on Sister Annella's body was increasing; it was observed, however, that many of them were not strictly boils but abscesses, lacking a core. Her abdomen and spine were covered with them; one, on her right eyebrow, containing two of three of the thorn-like "pilaes," was called "St. Rita's Thorn" by some of the sisters at the local convent. A huge boil on her left hip, "the size of a coconut, having three or four openings," caused her much pain. Although this fairly strains belief, the fact that it discharged continually for three months, ex-

elling as much as a quart of secretion each day, is proof enough of its size.

Again it was astonishing that a body so frail and poorly nourished could secrete so much and continue living. The boils formed in clusters so close together that it was impossible to place one's fingers between them; the secretion was extremely thick, causing great pain when it was pressed out. In spite of the pain of this operation, Sister Annella always thanked those who performed it for her. Most of the boils which ran for long periods of time, Sister Ignatia attested, were about the circumference of a tea-cup and half as high; they were of a bluish-green color, and made a sound when they were pressed.

The boils on the back of her knees were so numerous that they caused the cords of her knees to contract. This gave a bend to her knees resembling that of a normal sitting position, which remained until her death. When the pain of a body so covered with running boils is considered, together with the itching, the thorny "pilares," the affected hearing, and constant burning sensation in her stomach, it is nothing short of amazing that Sister Annella could have suffered it all, to say nothing of maintaining her resignation and cheerful disposition. It is not likely that she had one single moment free of suffering throughout 1926 to her death.

To these sufferings were added others. One Saturday evening her loud cries caused her mother to run to her bedroom. There, twisting in her bed as if dodging something, Sister Annella exclaimed, "Oh, Mamma, it is terrible! It seems as if darts like steel needles were run through my head and shoulders; some seem to go through my whole body; I can almost see them coming!" This frightened the mother, who asked her daughter how this was possible. "I don't know," Sister Annella replied, "but they seem to pierce my

whole body." These attacks occurred several times during 1926. She also suffered from several rather flippant remarks, not made in seriousness, by the parish priest. When she asked him if she might have ashes on Ash Wednesday, for example, he replied, "Oh, your father can give them to you."

Unable to eat any food more nourishing than buttermilk for fear that her fever and itch would increase, Sister Annella also suffered from a ravaging hunger. Often she would dream of eating. Her sister, Sister Ignatia, often slept in the same room with her when she visited home, and saw Sister Annella open her mouth and bend forward in sleep, as if biting into something; when she awoke, she would say sadly, "I thought I was eating." Once she told Sister Ignatia, "I had such a nice dream. I was eating baking powder biscuits, but when I bit into them, they had no taste—they were like cotton."

A similar dream concerned strawberries, which she had always liked very much. She often begged for "something to chew on," asking for a single clove or, as she once asked Sister Ignatia, for a few grains of sugar. Her mother discouraged Sister Ignatia from giving them to her, saying, "Mary, if you knew how she would suffer, you would not give them to her." Sister Ignatia consequently could not bring herself to return to the room, out of embarrassment, until late in the evening; then she was immediately greeted with a meek, disappointed, "Oh, you didn't bring it, did you?" But Sister Annella herself asked to be treated "like a drunkard" when she made such requests. One could see the color rise in her face whenever any food was taken. Painful attacks invariably followed.

Neither did Sister Annella enjoy the ordinary comforts of patients. On account of her nervous condition, her appearance, the suddenness of her attacks, and the sickening odor of her body, she could not enjoy visitors for any length of time. And a great many friends kept

away out of fear of contracting the disease, though all the doctors who had treated Sister Annella were in agreement that the disease was not contagious.

5

Occurrences seemingly supernatural in character also took place. One night Sister Annella called for her mother. As she entered the room, her daughter called out suddenly, "Oh, Mamma, who is that with you?" "I have no one with me," replied Mrs. Zervas. "Why, Mamma! She is there beside you—near the dresser all in white and as tall as you are." Her mother was afraid to look around, begged Sister Annella to go back to sleep, and left the room with her eyes closed. The next morning she had asked her daughter about the occurrences very casually, suggesting that she might have been dreaming. Sister Annella replied firmly, "No, I was not dreaming. But say no more about it."

Another time her mother came into the room when she was apparently in great distress. Pointing to the foot of her bed, Sister Annella said, "Sit down here, Mamma, it is better if someone is here with me." Then suddenly, turning herself sideways towards the window, she called out sternly, "Begone!", as if rebuking someone. Once she remarked, "Mamma, it is as if a thousand devils were bothering me!"

Sister Annella received the St. Maurus Blessing for the sick many times during her illness, and constantly meditated on a set of indulgenced stations of the cross from the shrine of Ste. Anne de Beaupré, a gift from Father Slag of Bismarck. Once someone mentioned in her presence feeling foolish about asking a certain question in the confessional. Sister Annella said, "It is better to feel foolish and ask the question than not to ask it and *be* a fool!"

Several times, in great pain, Sister Annella made the following known to her mother: "Of one thing I am glad, that I have a secret with God. Only God and I know what I am going through, and that gives me great joy. Mamma, you know some of it, but there are some things only God and I know," often adding, "I am glad I did not bring this sickness on myself." Sister Annella repeated substantially the same thing many times, but never revealed this "secret" to her mother or anyone else. Her mother regretted afterwards that she had not asked Sister Annella what the secret was, but felt that her daughter would have told her if she had wished it to be known.

Although Sister Annella was not given to complaining about her illness, nor even expressed a wish to be cured, she frequently made known her fear of giving scandal to those who heard her cry out in pain. "Perhaps I should not do that; maybe I have not enough will power," she said. In bad attacks she would clasp her hands over her head, scream, and roll in bed, or extend her hands backwards, strain and groan. "Sister, you will hurt yourself," her mother warned; but she replied, weeping bitterly, "It is the only way I can get relief."

Once when her mother felt grieved at seeing her daughter suffer so greatly, and felt at a loss to know what to do for her, Sister Annella said, "Do not feel bad, Mamma. You have done all you could, and are doing all you can. There is no cure, Mamma." Again her mother, seeing Sister Annella in terrible misery towards the end of her life, said to her, "Think of what St. Lawrence and the other saints had to bear," to which Sister Annella replied, "I don't know what they had to bear; God gave them grace and assistance – I know I have all I can stand."

The frequency of the later attacks led Sister Annella to exclaim once to her mother, "I feel so terrible, Mamma, I just want to cry all the time—I feel as though God had forgotten that I am here, or

that there is such a one as I." Her mother replied, "Sister, God knows you are here." "Oh, yes, Mamma, I have faith; but that feeling just comes over me, and I want to cry." Then she added, "My God, my God, have mercy on me!"

Another time she said that she felt as though she were being eaten alive; in her stomach she felt "as if there was a mouth chewing me up." And the external signs of the disease were especially bad on the abdomen, a painful suffering for one so modest. Once a visiting nun said to her, "Poor Sister, you are suffering a great deal, aren't you?" "Yes," she replied, "but it is the *kind* of suffering I am going through!"

During the month of April, 1926, her condition became so much worse that she seemed near death. Holy Viaticum was administered once more. When, however, Sister grew stronger again, it was decided to have a physician examine her again to see if at least some partial explanation of her suffering could be found. The superiors of the local convent and the convent at Bismarck accompanied Sister Annella to St. John's Hospital, Fargo, on April 28, 1926. At the hospital Sister Annella was given a thorough examination, with X-rays and fluoroscope, under the direction of a Dr. Weible. It was learned that all of her internal organs, stomach, liver, and gall, were intact and in normal condition. This fact was stated by Dr. F. Darrow, who also conducted an examination; the physicians had expected to find evidence of gall trouble to explain the stomach pain, but none was found.

Sister Annella was detained for several days there, as the doctors were confident they could do something for her. One of them remarked, "Job had boils, but had Job lived in our day, he would not have had any boils," a remark the wisdom of which was about tantamount to the success he had with Sister Annella. She grew

visibly worse under hospital care, and said to her nurse, "If this does not change, I will either lose my mind or die." She was given a full diet at the hospital, which was manifestly bad for her, as it had been tried without success at her home. On Saturday, May 8, Sister Annella was returned home in an ambulance; her temperature was one hundred three and three-fifths degrees.

Although Sister Annella's condition was becoming more and more grave, her father wrote to Mother Louise on April 25, "There is hope....I positively refuse to be discouraged." Sister Annella's temperature was often higher than one hundred three degrees, probably because of the constant secreting. But whereas formerly she could consume several quarts of milk a day, now she existed on almost nothing.

Her body became more emaciated; parts of it resembled wood, it was said. The calf of the leg was about the size of a cane, and had walnut-sized lumps on it. One could reach around the thigh, and the elbows and knees had dried at right angles. "The lower limbs," Mr. Zervas wrote, "were like dried sticks – there was no flesh on them, the knee-joints stuck out, the hips [were] hollowed out, where the flesh should [have been] – and still the itch kept on. The skin peeled off so that the bed was rough with the dry skins, causing her great discomfort....Her arms were likewise skin and bones, but her chest remained strong, her pulse good, her voice strong and melodious."

She still experienced great difficulty in getting any sleep, and was heard many times in the middle of the night saying, "All for Jesus, all for Jesus," and making acts of faith, hope, and charity.

Her hands were frequently packed with plantain leaves to relieve the soreness. Once, just after having had her hands packed in this

way, she was seized by an attack, and tore the wrappings from her hands. Her mother asked her why she had done this. She smiled wearily and said, "Well, Mamma, if you have a sore finger that itches, do you just look at it and say, 'My, but that finger itches,' and not scratch it?"

It was not long after this remark, in early spring of 1926, that the index finger on her mother's right hand became very sore on the inner side near the first joint; it itched and burned so much that it woke her up at night, and she was forced to scratch it to secure relief. The skin on the affected part of the finger became dark and scaled off, resembling Sister Annella's skin. Later the disease spread over the top of the finger and towards the hand. When Sister Annella saw it, she exclaimed, "Mamma, it looks just like mine. Does it ache to the bone?" Her mother answered, "Yes, it does." Weeping, Sister Annella said, "Oh, I would feel terrible if I brought that here to you." Later she told her mother, "Mamma, now you have a little idea of what I am suffering. Maybe God wanted you to know what mine was like."

Since the physicians had been unable to help Sister Annella, none was consulted about her mother's finger. Strong antiseptics were used on it without effect; the finger was kept wrapped, and a rubber finger covered it; yet the disease remained.

The Rev. Alfred Mayer, O.S.B., who had been pastor at St. Joseph's Church in Moorhead and under whose guidance Sister Annella had entered the convent in 1915, visited her one day; he was by this time the Prior of St. John's Abbey. He suggested that they make a novena together to St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus. "Yes, Father," Sister Annella replied, "I can do that, but every time a novena is made for me, my sufferings get worse during the novena."

This was certainly neither sarcasm nor impiety, but the plain truth; countless novenas had been made for her during her illness, and she was visibly worse during any of these special efforts of prayer. After Father Alfred left, she asked for her profession wreath and said, "Put it where I can see it. When I wear that wreath again, I'll be—" and stopped, since everyone knew what she meant.

Father Slag visited her several times. "I cannot describe her in her suffering," he wrote after these visits. "Words are too poor to give an exact description....She asked me not to pray for her recovery, but to pray that God's holy will might be done in her....I hardly recognized her, she was so disfigured. [She] was then twenty-six years of age, but she appeared to be seventy or eighty. She suffered intensely.... Her lips were drawn in pain, and she had practically lost her eyesight [because] her eyelids were so swollen....When I remarked to her that she must be suffering a great deal, at the same time encouraging her to offer up that suffering to our dear Lord, she smiled and said, 'It is not so bad, Father; if God gives me strength, I can bear it.' I am firmly convinced that Sister Annella practiced the virtue of patience in her suffering heroically."

When nuns came to visit her, they frequently sprinkled her bed with holy water. Sister Annella once remarked that this reminded her of "the little room at St. Benedict's where the bodies of the dead sisters are laid out before burial. I picture myself there, and all the sisters come and sprinkle my body with holy water."

It must not be thought that Sister Annella gave way to gloomy thoughts about the helplessness of her condition. On the contrary, she was always cheerful, and wanted others to be so. During a visit of Sister De' Pazzi, she and Sister Annella reviewed the time when they were teaching together at Bismarck. They sang some duets together; one of the songs needed instrumental accompaniment,

so Sister Annella kept time by striking her elbows against her sides. Her father wrote, "This rendition caused general merriment, but the contrast of the artists was striking. Whilst the one was in full vigor, the other was lying in a half-sitting position in bed, her grayish pale face covered with [secretion], her thin lips drawn smilingly over her white teeth, her...eyes possessing a merry look, her cheeks in wrinkles, her thin bony arms like sticks drumming her ribs. This formed a picture not easy to be forgotten, but testifying Sister Annella's happy mood in a physical condition [which] she was convinced had been ordained by God [for her]."

Once as some visitors left her room, her mother accompanied them downstairs, where they stood a while conversing about her suffering. Sister Annella overheard this conversation, and called for her mother. When she entered the room, her daughter said mischievously, "Oh, I thought the conversation was lagging, so I thought I would call you!".

A relative came to visit her, and, filled with deep respect, placed his hand—in which he held his rosary—on her head. She perceived this trick, and revealed her displeasure in no uncertain terms after he had gone, saying, "What does he mean by doing such a thing? I don't like it. I am only a heap of rottenness."

Once a sister from the local convent visited her, and Sister Annella told her, "Oh, Sister, I wish I could die," an expression of longing and happiness in the thought of eternal union with God. But suddenly she called the sister back, as she was leaving, and said, "Sister, I beg your pardon." "Why? What is the matter?" asked the sister. "You have not done anything wrong." "Oh, yes, Sister, I have. I said that I wished to die. I don't wish it. I have no wish but to live as long as God wants me to live. I do not ask to die now," and she wept.

With an especially poetic phrase, Sister Annella remarked one day, "I am buying my ticket for eternity and it is well worth the price."

6

In June of 1926, Sister Annella's mother felt very depressed about her daughter's condition. Although she wrote, "I never felt better than when taking care of Sister Annella," she saw that all her efforts helped her daughter's condition but little, and she began wondering at the wisdom of continuing with this care. She did not reveal these thoughts to anyone at the time, for she had been happy to receive permission to care for her daughter, and also to have her return from Fargo in May. But now, coupled with her fear that she, too, might have contracted the dread disease, was a feeling that her care might not have proved better than that which was offered by the Benedictine hospitals.

As this trial was bothering Mrs. Zervas, the physical indisposition with which she had been afflicted for some time before her daughter came into her care, returned with severity, and she was forced to take to her bed. She tried to conceal this suffering from Sister Annella, and secretly wondered at its return after two years of heavier work and less rest than she had had before. Suddenly she recalled, "I took Sister Annella home in the name of Jesus. I did not worry about my own trouble or ability to take care of her, and my health was better." She then dispelled all thought of giving up the care of her daughter, and from then on seems to have been blessed with a permanent cure.

The Rev. Aloysius J. Kampmann of Sacred Heart Church, Sauk Rapids, Minnesota, visited Sister Annella and presented her with the reliquary cross he had brought from Rome. In addition to the

large relic of the True Cross,⁵ the cross contained relics of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Francis of Assisi, St. William, St. Philip Neri, St. Aloysius Gonzaga, St. Rita of Cassia, and St. Agnes. It was accompanied by the authenticity document and another document, already referred to, explaining that the gift was meant as a consolation for Sister Annella because she was deprived of her convent life. This cross was one of the greatest spiritual joys of the last year of her life. Sister Ignatia once remarked that it must be very consoling to have such precious relics. Sister Annella replied, "Yes, it is, but I feel that Jesus is always so near me, and I am so near Him, that I do not have to think so much about them."

A relative of Sister Annella, seeing her suffer severely, was moved to tears, and cried, "Poor Sister, you have to suffer so much." "Oh, well," replied Sister Annella, "you also have your sufferings and troubles, through your whole life. You suffer a long time. The only difference is that I get mine in a bunch!"

As the emaciation continued, her limbs became very dark, and there was only a thin layer of flesh on her bones, especially on the legs. These were shown to the superior of the local convent and to certain other sisters, though Sister Annella objected, not wishing to be a "curiosity." Upon being told that the sisters had said, "To see that condition is like a meditation," however, she no longer objected to this embarrassment, but even inquired of visiting sisters thereafter if they would care to see her limbs, offering herself as a sacrifice for their spiritual benefit. Although her hearing improved somewhat, there was still a whistling sound in her ears whenever she blew her nose.

She asked her mother what she thought of her condition. Her mother replied, "You wouldn't mind if I told you that you don't look like you are going to get well, would you?" Sister Annella responded, "Oh, I wouldn't mind. I am glad to die, but I am wondering if I will

be afraid. You know I have to go all alone." She was told that the Blessed Virgin and her Guardian Angel would be with her, but she said, "Yes, but I wonder, will I be afraid?"

The reverend mother was notified of Sister Annella's grave condition, and she sent a sister from St. Benedict's to help care for her. Somehow Sister Annella could not rest as long as this sister was there. She cried about it afterwards, saying, "Oh, Mamma, this is terrible! She is such a good and pious sister, but when she comes into my room I feel as if a big animal were going around the room. I thought I would like to have her here, and now I cannot have her near me." No explanation could suffice for such strange mental suffering, so painful to her, but it clearly resembles others of a similar nature which she had been suffering all along.

From this period to her death, a period of two months, Sister Annella could no longer be bathed with water. She was cleansed only with oil, and even then so much skin exfoliated with the oil that no one was certain how much value the cleansing had. Once in great pain she exclaimed that she could hardly endure it any longer, but quickly, as if correcting herself, added, "Jesus, send me more pain, but give me the strength to bear it!" "It seems," her father wrote, "that the evil spirit used this as a personal attack, because it was often heard that she would call out, 'Begone!' in a sharp, commanding tone."

A certain school-friend of Sister Annella called on her frequently, and this young lady was afflicted with a stomach disorder in which Sister Annella evinced a special interest. Sister advised her friend what to do for it, and the advice gave her friend complete freedom from the disorder. The same friend called on Sister Annella a few days before Sister's death, and Sister Annella was still very much concerned about her welfare.

A public novena in honor of Our Lady of Victory was conducted at Lackawanna, New York, from August 5 to August 14, 1926, by the Rt. Rev. Monsignor Nelson Baker. Sister Annella's name was included in this novena, and a public novena was made by members of the Zervas family. During this novena, as was the usual case, Sister Annella's sufferings increased, but it was thought that only a miracle could save her now that her strength was failing so rapidly.

At the beginning of the week of the feast of the Assumption, Sister Annella asked her father, "Papa, what do you think of me, do you think I will die soon?" Her father answered, "It may be that our Lord will soon take you to Himself." "Oh, Papa," his daughter replied, "do you think so? I will be so happy to die. I don't want anyone to pray for my recovery, but to thank God for the suffering He has sent me."

The pain in her stomach grew worse, "as if," she said, "it had been struck by a hammer and something burst." Secretion ran out of her body in great quantities. To her mother she remarked, "Mamma, do you think that after three more days of suffering our Lord will reward me?" Before her mother could answer, she added, "Oh, yes, I know He will!"

As mentioned before, Sister Annella had succeeded, with the aid of gloves, in doing some lovely needle-work during her illness. Now she fastened the needles in the thread, handed them to her mother, and said, "Mamma, I cannot finish this,"⁶ adding that her youngest sister could finish it.

Sister Ignatia arrived home on Thursday, August 12; Sister Celestine from St. Benedict's was also there. Sister Annella asked Sister Celestine (who was, it may be remembered, in charge of her as

an aspirant) if it would be wrong to ask our Lord if she might die in order to be in heaven for the feast of the Assumption. Sister Celestine replied that it would be all right, as long as the intention of conformity to the holy will was added. Sister Ignatia said that though she would want her sister with her, it would be selfish of her to wish her here on earth when she might be in heaven. That evening, Sister Annella remarked to her mother, "On a night like this I do not like to be alone." "You are not alone," her mother answered. "We are here. You can call me if you want me."

But Sister Annella did not call during that night. Early Friday morning she was found nearly speechless; her face was drawn to one side, and seemed paralyzed. At 6:30 a.m., she said to her father, "I am so thirsty, Papa." About 7:00 she asked, nearly inaudibly, if she might receive Holy Communion early because her throat and tongue were so parched and dry.

The Rev. Leo Hoppe, O.S.B., assistant at St. Joseph's, administered the Sacrament to Sister Annella about 7:15; the pastor, the Rev. Edmund Basel, O.S.B., was reading Mass at St. Ansgar's Hospital, and could not have arrived before 8:00. After Holy Communion, Sister Annella's thirst was quenched, though with great difficulty. She asked her mother, "Mamma, did you go to Holy Communion this morning?" "Yes," her mother answered. Sister said, "That's good." "I never remember that she asked me that before," Mrs. Zervas wrote—probably because it was so well known that she was a daily communicant.

Then the usual morning changing of Sister Annella's gown and bedding was attended to, and it was found that her gown was wet from the neck down to the feet with perspiration extraordinary in quantity and color. The gown was a dark brown color, and looked

"as if it had been dipped in coffee." In removing the gown, the skin of her body came off in rolls, and layers were thickly matted to the gown. The previous evening she had been visited by two or three sisters, and her limbs were uncovered; her pulse at that time was ninety and strong.

Later Friday morning, Sister Ignatia went in to see Sister Annella, quietly so as not to alarm their mother, and whispered to her, "Sister, this morning at Holy Communion I asked the Sacred Heart to take you soon—even today—if it is His holy will." Sister Annella reached for her sister's hand and drew in her breath so sharply that Sister Ignatia feared it might kill her. Then she "chuckled like a little child delighted over something," and said, "Mary, I am so happy!"

Her mother heard this, and rushed into the room; finding Sister Ignatia so close to Sister Annella, and holding her hand, she warned her to be careful, thinking no doubt of the possibility that she might contract an infection such as was paining Mrs. Zervas at that very time. Sister Annella replied, "It will not be long any more, Mamma." To Sister Ignatia she said, "Just think, Mary, I will be able to speak to Him as I have never spoken before. I will see the Blessed Virgin, and little Raymond⁷ too." Sister Ignatia was crying; Sister Annella looked at her and said, "Don't feel bad." Then she repeated a request, "Tell Mamma not to cry and feel bad, but only to thank God."

Shortly after this conversation, Sister Annella became quiet, and her face appeared waxy. Sister Celestine suggested that she should receive Extreme Unction at once. Father Leo administered the sacrament to her, and litanies and prayers for the dying were recited by all those present. Father Leo imparted a last blessing and remarked, "I think Sister has passed away." This was between ten and eleven o'clock in the morning.

However, Sister Annella revived again, and was able to speak clearly and cheerfully. Her mother told her that her face looked better. This remark seemed to displease Sister Annella, and she averted her face, seemingly to avoid hearing anything further about herself. "Speak to me of heaven," she said. "Oh, it seems too good to be true—to be with Jesus and see Him, to be with Him forever, never to leave Him!" She asked her mother and Sister Celestine to tell her more about heaven.

Seeing her mother and Sister Ignatia in tears, she said, "Don't cry, Mamma, I am going to see God," and, slipping her hand in her mother's and drawing her near she added, "I would like to take you along, Mamma, but I cannot. You are needed yet, but whatever I ask Jesus He will not refuse me. I have been His bride here on earth; He will not refuse me anything. I will ask Him for whatever you need, and Jesus will not refuse me what I ask.

Her mother said, "Ask Jesus that I may die a happy death like you." Sister Annella replied with emphasis, "I will ask that you die better than I." Then she glanced out of the window of her room, and recited the words of the first verse of a favorite poem of hers, *Rabboni*, by the Rev. Joseph Shea, S.J.:

When I am dying,
How glad I shall be
That the lamp of my life
Has been burned out for Thee.⁸

She was heard to say at noon, "O my Jesus, soon I will be resting in your arms for all of eternity." After noon she asked if Sister Magdalen, her superior at Bismarck, had been notified of her condition, recalling that her superior had asked for this favor. Her father found

her smiling, and recalled that she had recovered after her two former receptions of the last sacrament. "Sister's smile seemed to say, 'It will not happen again,'" he wrote. Informed of the time, she said, "One more day. Every day is long now." Then she said, "Now that I can speak again, I should like to go to confession."

Then she swallowed a small quantity of milk, at the suggestion of her mother, and continued asking the time of day, always answering this information with a sigh of "Oh, how long will it be yet?" She remarked to Sister Ignatia, "Oh, Mary, I am so glad that I am going to die. But how can I die when I am yet so strong?" To Sister Celestine she said, "Sister, God has been so good to me. I have been so happy in the convent, and now He is going to take me to heaven. God has been so good to me!"

Shortly after six o'clock, preparatory to making her confession, Sister Annella's clothing was to be changed again, and she asked Sister Celestine if she might be left as she was, since the process was such a painful one. Sister Celestine informed Mrs. Zervas of the request. When her mother entered the room, Sister Annella said, "Oh, Mamma, what is the use? I am going to die anyway. Don't bother." But her mother did not think it proper for her to receive the sacrament that evening, and Holy Communion the next morning, in that condition. Sister Annella replied immediately, "Oh, yes, I should be more considerate of others."

The change of clothing caused her great suffering, as a large boil on her spine was opened in the process. She breathed a deep sigh of pain, but after she had confessed, about seven o'clock, she rested quietly. About an hour later, the sisters decided to return to the local convent. Her mother then asked if Sister Annella wished her to sit up with her during the night, recalling her daughter's request of the previous evening. But she replied, "No, go to bed,

poor Mamma, I think I will sleep. I don't know when I have felt so well." Her voice and pulse were strong. About 10:30, Sister Magdalen arrived from Bismarck, but left at once for the convent, since Sister Annella seemed to be sleeping peacefully. At eleven o'clock, Sister Annella called for some milk, and consumed a few ounces with a straw, as usual. After that she rested quietly again.

About 12:30 or 12:45 Saturday morning, Sister Annella called her mother once again, and asked for a drink of water. Since she received Holy Communion daily, and always kept her fast, she was told that it was too late for her to drink anything. She suggested that they might telephone her father at his market to get Western Union time; but since the house clock read 12:50 by this time, it was thought unnecessary. "I must have a drink. I am just burning up inside!" Sister Annella exclaimed, and, again showing her clarity of mind, added, "I received Holy Communion twice yesterday."

After taking the water, Sister Annella did not seem to feel better, but told her mother to put a screen in front of the open window so that she might not be distracted in prayer. Her mother inquired as to the cause of her daughter's unrest, but Sister Annella moved her hands back and forth and muttered a reply of which only the word "question" was audible. Thinking that she was annoyed at being so close to the open window, her mother moved her bed slightly.

Then, in her father's words, "with a loud scream Sister Annella grabbed her pillow with both hands and tried to cover her face, and threw her head from side to side as if trying to get away from something, all the while screaming with a terrible strain, as someone being strangled. Then she reached behind her head and tried to pull the bedding over her face, pulling with such a strain as to tear the sheet, screaming all the while in a strangled-like tone. Sister

Annella then took hold of her mother's wrist and gave such a loud, piercing, and unearthly scream that it caused Sister's mother to shrink under its effect.

"In the beginning her mother had thought it to be a severe itching attack. Chilled to the heart by this terrible scream, and horrified by the...look in Sister's eyes, which seemed at that moment to be split up and down...the mother tried to free her wrist from Sister Annella's iron grip, but had actually to pry Sister's hand, which felt as cold as ice, off from her wrist. Sister then fell back, and her head was bent backwards, as one held by the throat, gurgling, strained sounds coming from her throat as if being choked, whilst her head tossed vehemently right and left, as if trying to free herself from something. Then Sister threw herself from side to side with a motion...to raise herself."

Since Mrs. Zervas was alone in the house except for the two sleeping children, she rushed downstairs to call her husband, who was working late at his market. Mr. Zervas could hear his daughter's screams clearly over the telephone, "cries that resembled," he insisted, "the terrified shrieks of a person whose life is threatened by someone."

Throughout the time Mrs. Zervas was out of the room, loud screams were heard. She returned to find Sister Annella raised in bed, in a sitting or partly kneeling position, owing to her bent knees, scratching her left shoulder with her left hand, and with her right arm beating the air as if warding off something, saying continually, "Go away, you dirty thing! I don't want you here! Go!" In this struggle she also recited some aspirations her mother could not afterwards recall their exact words, but thought them to have been, "My God, have mercy on me," "My Jesus, mercy," and others.

Shortly afterwards, her father reached home. Rushing into the upstairs room, he found Sister Annella in a half-sitting position, scratching her lower right arm, which she held raised, with her left hand. She greeted him with a smile, "though it could be noticed that it was difficult for her." "How are you, Sister?" he asked. "I feel better, Papa," was her reply. Scarcely had she spoken these words, however, when she sank back on her pillow, her head bent back as if held by some physical force, and from her throat there again came sounds resembling strangulation. "These sounds did not resemble the death-rattle of a dying person," her father attested, "but sounded exactly as if her throat was being compressed by an exterior grip or force.

A small phial of St. Walburga's oil⁹ was broken open (with some difficulty), and a small amount applied to Sister Annella's forehead in the form of a cross, with a piece of blessed palm. Because it seemed that this was not an ordinary attack, the rest of the family was summoned.

Sister Annella's brother Hubert, who was about to run and get the priest, entered the room and heard his sister call to him, "Hubert, kneel down and say your night prayers for me." He obeyed, "struck," as his father wrote, "with consternation, for how could Sister Annella know that he, being tired from the day's work at the market, had fallen asleep without finishing his prayers, which only he and God knew?" The fact that Sister Annella addressed her brother so clearly and strongly is an added proof that the sounds which had issued from her throat moments before were neither a death-rattle nor the result of some internal throat trouble.

The sisters from the convent arrived: Sisters Ignatia, Magdalen, Celestine, Wilfrida, and Mercedes. Sister Magdalen remarked immediately, "She is not dying; she is too strong." While it was

certain that Sister Annella had indeed exhibited a great deal of strength, yet it was equally certain that the events of the previous hour bespoke a decided turn for the worse. It was found necessary to guard the sides of her bed to prevent her body from falling out. In their effort to straighten the bedclothes, the sisters found that the double blankets were so twisted and tangled that it was impossible to find the ends, and the hem of the sheet, which had itself been tucked far under the bed,¹⁰ had been torn completely off. This was puzzling indeed, for Sister Annella had been so weak all during the previous week that, when she stood without support, she sank to the floor. She could not have used any instrument to tear the hem, and it was unthinkable that she could have done it with her own hands while remaining in bed.

Hubert, who stood at the foot of the bed, remarked that she might want her rosary. Sister Annella closed her eyes and moved her head as if in negation. "Maybe her crucifix," he suggested, and she smiled assent. The indulgenced crucifix was placed in her hand. She tried to bring the corpus to her lips, but, by some unaccountable force, her hand slipped away to one side or the other. She then took hold of the crucifix with both hands, but again it slipped away from her mouth. Finally both her hands and the crucifix fell over her head. With a supreme effort, she pulled it over the top of her head, sliding it along her skull with such force that it was feared she would lacerate the skin. Still she could not bring the crucifix to her lips. Quickly Sister Ignatia took her own crucifix and pressed it to her sister's lips. Sister Annella puckered them and kissed it.

While the priest was on his way, blessed candles were lit and the rosary recited, as well as an act of resignation to the will of God and a prayer in honor of St. Benedict, after which Sister Annella rested calmly. Father Leo gave her absolution about 2:30, and the

prayers for the dying were recited again. It was not thought possible to administer Holy Viaticum again, but Sister Annella, who feared that she would die all alone, had as the closest Watcher at her bedside Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

"Lying on her left side, her head slightly bent forward, her eyes partly open, her mouth...drawn in a faint smile, her knees bent, the entire form presenting a picture like the...stations where Our Lord lies prostrate under the cross," her father wrote, "Sister Annella peacefully breathed her last....Death occurred at 3:15 a.m. on the Vigil of the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, [Saturday], August 14, 1926, and at the end of the novena to Our Lady of Victory. Sister Annella had desired to die before Our Lady's feast, God willing. Our Lord had granted her wish."

8

The Rev. John A. H. Slag, Sister Annella's spiritual director at Bismarck, celebrated a Requiem Mass for her that very morning. "There is in my mind," he wrote, "no doubt of Sister Annella's union with God." The Very Rev. Alfred Mayer, O.S.B., her former pastor and the Prior of St. John's Abbey, offered a Gregorian series of Masses¹¹ for the repose of her soul.

Sister Ignatia, who returned to Sister Annella's room alone to keep vigil by the body of her dead sister, was the first to note a striking phenomenon: all traces of an offensive odor had left the room after Sister Annella's death. Because the same phenomenon has occasionally been noted in other kinds of deaths, it might be thought inconsequential. But it must be remembered that up to this time the odor was so strong and unpleasant that visitors could seldom endure it for more than a few minutes, and Sister Annella herself

admitted on numerous occasions that she could scarcely endure it. Even more pertinent is that fact that the odor had clung to her clothing and bedclothes for long periods of time, and could be noticed in the hallway and downstairs in her home.¹² Now it had vanished completely.

Dr. William Long, in whose charge Sister Annella had been while at St. John's Hospital, made an official statement of death. The undertakers then came to prepare the body for shipment and burial, which was of course to be made in the convent cemetery at St. Joseph, Minnesota. The body, emaciated beyond belief, weighed hardly thirty-six pounds.¹³ It was placed in a light basket. Mrs. Zervas, for some reason, warned the men to be careful about carrying the body. Nevertheless these men, who were used to carrying far heavier loads, as they proceeded carefully down the stairs (which was well-lighted from above and below), suddenly dropped the basket, and, though it had been securely strapped and buckled, it came undone, and the body slid out and struck the wall with a crash.

The men expressed their amazement and sorrow at this accident as Mrs. Zervas exclaimed despairingly, "I could have carried her down myself!" But Mr. Zervas may have given the better analysis by questioning, "Was this really an accident...or was it perhaps the finale of what had been going on in Sister Annella's room about two hours before, when she was alone?"

Sister Ignatia dressed the body, and observed that new flesh was still present under the exfoliations, and that the body was so shrunken that the religious habit, which normally closed at the center, reached the opposite shoulder. The body was returned to the home in a plain casket, "as is fitting for a religious who has left the world and its pomp, and has vowed poverty," about noon the same day. As the

hearse drew up to the house, the house dog, a black police-dog, attacked the undertakers and caused no little confusion. Finally the casket was brought into the house and placed in the parlor, between blessed candles and below the relic of the Cross of Christ.

Shortly before this, Sister Ignatia had asked her mother about her finger. It was found to be as infected as before, and fear was expressed that it might have to be amputated. However, Mrs. Zervas was urged to place her finger on Sister Annella's cheek and ask for her prayers. Nothing more was done about the finger, and it was forgotten in the days which followed. But rather soon afterwards—it is impossible to establish when—the finger ceased to itch, and when the rubber covering was removed a short time later, the infection had left it, never to return. So the first favor which Sister Annella obtained from her heavenly Spouse was obtained, fittingly, for her mother.

That night the sisters kept vigil at the body. An owl's cries resounded so loudly that the windows had to be closed. "It sounded as if the little creature was chanting its *Miserere* and holding night watch for her who had spent so many a night in solitude, kept awake by itching and pain, and suffering all this, 'All for Jesus...'"

On Sunday morning, August 15, Sister De' Pazzi arrived on an early train. In the afternoon, a photograph was taken of Sister Annella's body, and shortly afterwards the casket was transported to St. Joseph's Church, where Vespers for the feast of the Assumption were sung. That night the vigil was kept in the church. Monday morning, at nine o'clock, the Rev. Edmund Basel, O.S.B., celebrated a Requiem High Mass, assisted by a choir of sisters. Shortly before two o'clock in the afternoon, the body was removed from the church and placed on a train to St. Joseph.

The parents and Sisters Ignatia, De' Pazzi, and Magdalen, accompanied the body, which was met at St. Joseph. Chanting the *Miserere*, the reverend mother and the sisters at St. Benedict's accompanied the body to the same little room where Sister Annella had once imagined herself, and the sisters sprinkled the body with holy water. During the rest of the day, the events of the previous week were related to the reverend mother.

Tuesday morning, at eight o'clock, funeral services were held in Sacred Heart Chapel, with Father Slag as celebrant and other priests present in the sanctuary. After the ceremony, the body was conveyed to the convent cemetery, where it was again given the liturgical rites and wished eternal rest.

In the hearts of those standing about the grave that day, especially of those who had witnessed Sister Annella's great suffering in union with Christ, there was an overpowering feeling that Our Lady of Victory had answered their prayers with a great victory indeed.



Do you believe you have received a favor through the intercession of Sister Annella? Please report it to sisterannella.org to support the canonization efforts.

EPILOGUE

Because it was evident to those who had seen for themselves or heard others tell of the sufferings of Sister Annella that hers was a soul remarkably graced by God, requests for an account of her life were received by the Zervas family almost immediately after her burial. In the latter part of September, 1926, Mrs. Zervas wrote a letter to her niece, Sister M. Everard, O.S.F., of the convent of Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Providence, Rhode Island, in answer to such a request. The letter proved too long to send, but was utilized by Hubert Zervas, her husband, in the preparation of an even longer account requested by the Very Rev. Alfred Mayer, O.S.B.; the concluding remarks of that account were dated July 16, 1928. Supplementary material had been gathered and carefully annotated from March, 1927, at the request of the Most Rev. Joseph F. Busch, Bishop of St. Cloud, by a distinguished scholar, also from St. John's Abbey, the Rev. Alexius Hoffmann, O.S.B.

A short life sketch of Sister Annella was written from this material by the Rev. Joseph Kreuter, O.S.B., entitled *An Apostle of Suffering in Our Day*. This account first appeared in *The Josephinum Weekly*, published at that time in Columbus, Ohio,¹ and a German translation, made by the author himself, appeared in *Der Wanderer*, a German

Catholic weekly published in St. Paul, Minnesota. *The Grail*, a monthly magazine of the Benedictine Abbey at St. Meinrad, Indiana, reprinted the English article in July, 1928, and, to satisfy a large number of requests for copies, published it in booklet form in 1931. A German booklet, reprinted from *Der Wanderer*, was issued sometime later, and there were also Dutch and Polish translations. A translation into Singhalese, after appearing in a Catholic paper in Ceylon, was reprinted in booklet form. A French translation of the same sketch, with a preface by the Very Rev. Canon Cyrille Labrecque of Québec, was published by the Librairie d'Action Catholique in Québec in 1945. A second edition of the English booklet, published by the St. John's Abbey Press, followed in 1946.

Many who read this account or came to know of Sister Annella in other ways, wrote to express their edification. Michael Cardinal Faulhaber, Archbishop of Munich and Freising, wrote to Mr. Zervas on June 20, 1927:² "What you have written of the suffering and death of your daughter Annella has touched me profoundly. It is surely wonderful how a soul is sometimes guided by the Holy Ghost, especially if it has consecrated itself wholly to God, and, by this [consecration], placed itself in the keeping of the Holy Ghost. It must be a great consolation for the parents to have now such an intercessor in heaven. I thank you for these...accounts, which have given me such spiritual edification."

The Most Rev. Joseph Chartrand, Archbishop of Indianapolis, wrote, "What a glorious victim that good religious was!" The Most Rev. Ludwig Sebastian, Bishop of Speyer, who had offered Sister Annella the help of his prayers as early as September, 1924, wrote on May 19, 1930, "I have read your account with great feeling...Sister Annella is taken now not [only] from the company of her fellow sisters, but from all. I am glad that her sacrifice, which the good God has exacted

from her with her surrender, will be rewarded by Him. May the good sister be a good intercessor before the throne of God for us, too."

The Rt. Rev. Abbot Bernard Murphy, O.S.B., of St. Benedict's Abbey, Mount Angel, Oregon, wrote in 1931, "She is undoubtedly a soul of special predilection on the part of our dear Lord....It does one good, in these days of such worldliness and pleasure-seeking, to find such a soul in our own land. God speed the day on which she will be raised to the honors of the altar."

The Ven. Abbess Clare Agnes Zanoni, of the monastery of Santa Chiara, Assisi, wrote, "I was deeply moved reading the sweet, edifying story of your little child saint. Oh yes, she is really a chosen soul, very dear to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and as soon as I read her wonderful life of love and sorrow, I...asked God, through her... to help me." The Rev. V. R. Tarcisius, O.M.I., of Talamannar, Ceylon, wrote to Mr. Zervas on December 17, 1928, "I thank God for having brought to my acquaintance a holy family which has brought forth, lived together with, and nursed to the last minute, a saint."

It was not long before reports of seemingly miraculous cures and other favors attributed to the intercession of Sister Annella, many notarized and attested by doctors, were sent to the authorities. An unusual number, of more recent date, have come from French Canada.

Only a month after Sister Annella's death, Mrs. Zervas's mother, Philomène Levitre, came to live with her daughter for reasons of health. She required constant care, which her loving daughter continued to give her until her death in June, 1927. Mrs. Zervas spent the years after her mother's death in prayer and good works. On April 9, 1931, she collapsed from a heart ailment. She grew weaker during the following months, but did not abandon her daily Mass

and Communion. On October 3, having received the sacrament of Extreme Unction, she died. A solemn Requiem Mass was celebrated on October 6, the day of her burial, with six priests in attendance, a final privilege of one who had been known for her extraordinary respect for the priesthood.

Hubert Zervas continued his charitable life for another decade, managing his business and writing voluminously to friends all over the world, but never interrupting his devout life. On May 8, 1932, he wrote a short account of the life of his wife, which he called "my last love-letter," which was published in *The Catholic Daily Tribune* for July 3, 1932. It is known that he helped many religious and students in the mission fields, and especially seminarians at the Collegium Germanicum in Rome. His library of spiritual books was one of his greatest comforts.

He wrote to a cousin, "God's ways are inscrutable, yet all the happiness of our lives is directed by a loving dispensation of Divine Providence....I spend some time in evening prayer and spiritual reading. I go to bed for a needed rest, and rise in the morning to give God the greatest honor by hearing Holy Mass, and receive Holy Communion, then begin my daily work. I [find] in this a great consolation and strong support. It [dispels] loneliness. In intercourse with God and in living for Him for Whom we were created, we find the real purpose of our lives." He learned that his mother's aunt, Frau Johannes Tix, a Franciscan Tertiary, had died on June 30, 1931, and that she had four daughters in religion.

The Rev. Alphonse Breault, O.M.I., has described a visit with Mr. Zervas in 1939 in the following terms, "[He] spoke... nearly three hours, and with increasing interest, about grace. He spoke with enthusiasm about the book of Scheeben, *The Glories of Divine Grace*....[One] can picture how he could teach religion and grace and virtue to his

own children, and give them a solid Christian formation...[He] gave me also a little German canticle³ which he liked very much to sing:

*Harre meine Seele
Harre des Herrn,
Alles Ihm befehle
Hilft Er doch so gern!
Wenn alles bricht
Gott verlässt dich nicht,
Grösser als der Helfer
Wird die Not ja nicht
In allen Sturmen, in aller Not,
Wird Er dich beschirmen,
Der Treue Gott!"*

He died in peace on August 4, 1941, in St. John's Hospital, Fargo, after having received Extreme Unction, and a Solemn Requiem Mass was celebrated for him in St. Joseph's Church, Moorhead, the parish church he had served so faithfully and so long.

It is certainly not out of the question that Sister Annella may one day be raised to the honors of the altar. Before that can occur, however, a long and thorough process of examination by the Church must take place. Should that fall within the plan of God, it would certainly be met with the greatest joy on the part of her many fervent admirers all over the world. Yet, as Canon Labrecque reminds us,⁴ "Whatever may happen, everyone can pray to her and have confidence in her intercession." At any rate, her message of patient, cheerful, thankful, and obedient resignation to suffering will continue to be an inspiration to those suffering souls to whom, from the very beginning, her life has meant the most.



A LITANY OF SUFFERING

BASED UPON THE LIFE OF SISTER ANNELLA ZERVAS, O.S.B.

*“No one knew [all that] she went through except
the One for Whom she suffered.”*

Sister Magdalen

Jesus, mercy.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

God, all in accord with Your unique design and holy will for my life, please give me the grace...

To honor, respect, and be obedient to my living parents; and to have a generous and forgiving heart in remembering my deceased parents.

All for You, Jesus.

To love and cherish my family, especially any who may be a challenge for me to love.

All for You, Jesus.

To respond generously to the Vocation to which you call me.

All for You, Jesus.

That no one will miss their Vocation as willed by You, and may I do my part to support others in their unique Vocations.

All for You, Jesus.

To give honor to You and to be an example in my daily duties.

All for You, Jesus.

To always have something pleasant to say, never offering an uncharitable word.

All for You, Jesus.

For the grace to be conscientious.

All for You, Jesus.

*God, You are the only one who knows my soul;
therefore, if you will, help me...*

To comfort others and give of myself as a gift even when I am in the midst of affliction.

God, give me the strength to bear it.

To overcome trials and temptations.

God, give me the strength to bear it.

To receive affirmations and compliments, even if it brings me sorrow, and to give the glory back to You.

God, give me the strength to bear it.

To be kind and obedient to the point of suffering.

God, give me the strength to bear it.

To resign myself to You as it pleases You.

God, give me the strength to bear it.

To accept that it is a blessing to suffer when joined to your Son's greater suffering.

God, give me the strength to bear it.

To only suffer how You will it.

God, give me the strength to bear it.

To be cheerful in suffering.

God, give me the strength to bear it.

To ask for more suffering according to Your will.

God, give me the strength to bear it.

Jesus, You are my truest friend; please give me the grace...

To grow in my living faith in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

Jesus, You are my truest friend.

To receive You in Holy Communion as often as You would permit.

Jesus, You are my truest friend.

To long for You so greatly that I beg to receive You in the Blessed Sacrament.

Jesus, You are my truest friend.

To grow in love of You in the Eucharist through frequent visits to the Tabernacle.

Jesus, You are my truest friend.

Recognizing the special favors You have shown me, I must give all that I can in return.

Jesus, You are my truest friend.

That my greatest consolation in this life will be the daily reception of You in the Holy Eucharist.

Jesus, You are my truest friend.

To feel You so intimately near that I do not need external reminders.

Jesus, You are my truest friend.

To prepare well and at length for frequent Confession, resolved, by Your grace, to persevere in the pursuit of holiness and to become a saint.

Jesus, You are my truest friend.

To possess a greater understanding of You, Jesus who is my truest friend.

Jesus, You are my truest friend.

God, so that I am not fearful or discouraged to grow and become more like You, I pray...

That I grow in humility, always having the desire to be instructed for growth and alignment of my will with Your holy will.

God, save me from discouragement.

That everything I do at work or play, and all talents be used and taken up for Jesus and bring holy cheer to others.

God, save me from discouragement.

That I may have a desire for holy perfection.

God, save me from discouragement.

That I offer up all my weaknesses in humility.

God, save me from discouragement.

That even in the midst of temptation, I will remain steadfast in Your design and will for my life.

God, save me from discouragement.

That I may always be pleased with what pleases You.

God, save me from discouragement.

That I never ask to be relieved of what You will, but ask only for the grace to bear it.

God, save me from discouragement.

That I always have the confidence that You know best.

God, save me from discouragement.

That if I feel abandoned by You, I will always have the grace to persevere in the trust that You are near.

God, save me from discouragement.

That You will give me the strength to never give up and to always abide in the virtue of Hope.

God, save me from discouragement.

*God, so that You will give me the grace to be resigned
to all things as You will it...*

That I search for and pursue the best ways to please You.

God, I resign myself completely to Your will.

That I be open to the virtue of piety and the gift of a humble
and childlike disposition.

God, I resign myself completely to Your will.

That I long to carry out Your holy design.

God, I resign myself completely to Your will.

That I have the desire and follow through to give myself
away to You.

God, I resign myself completely to Your will.

That Your holy will be done.

God, I resign myself completely to Your will.

That You will make me a saint.

God, I resign myself completely to Your will.

That I live this life in submission to You.

God, I resign myself completely to Your will.

That I will lead others to You.

God, I resign myself completely to Your will.

That I live my life for what pleases You.

God, I resign myself completely to Your will.

Jesus, give me the excitement and disposition to marvel that it seems almost 'too good to be true,' that You invite me to Eternal Life in heaven with You...

God, have mercy. My Jesus, Mercy.

God, have mercy. My Jesus, Mercy.

God, have mercy. My Jesus, Mercy.

I entrust everything to the Blessed Virgin Mary, that she may care for it so that nothing is ever lost.

All holy men and women, Saints of God, pray for us!

Prayer to Obtain the Canonization of the Servant of God Sister Annella Zervas, O.S.B.

O Heavenly Father, who art the Author of all virtue and Source of all holiness, and who, through Thy faithful servant, Sister Annella Zervas, hast been pleased to give the world an example of patience and obedient resignation under suffering, we pray Thee to grant us the grace which we ask through her mediation, and thus to manifest her sanctity, that Thy Holy Church may soon be able to proclaim it for Thy greater glory, O God, and for the glorification of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, whom Sister Annella loved so fervently. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father (*three times*).

Lord Jesus, glorify Thy Spouse Sister Annella Zervas, OSB. We beg of Thee by Thy Holy Cross.

Nihil Obstat:

Reverend Father Robert Schreiner, STL
Censor Librorum

Imprimatur:

Most Reverend Andrew H. Cozzens, D.D., S.T.D.
Bishop of Crookston
Given at: Crookston, Minnesota on August 18, 2025

The Litany of Suffering, inspired by the life of Sister Annella Zervas, OSB, as presented in Ticket for Eternity by James Kritzeck, is a prayer composed by Amanda Zurface, JCL. The Prayer to Obtain the Canonization of the Servant of God Sister Annella Zervas, OSB was written by Reverend Father Joseph Kreuter, OSB.

NOTES

NOTES TO PROLOGUE

1. He was ordained on November 15, 1772, by Jean Olivier Briand (1715-1794), Bishop of Québec. Joseph Mathurin Bourg (1747-1794) had been ordained in September of the same year in Montreal, but exercised his ministry in Nova Scotia.
2. It is not uncommon there; a certain General Napoleon Zervas, born about 1890, was created Minister of Public Order in January, 1947.
3. "Matthias Joseph Scheeben [was] the foremost theologian of the nineteenth century, whose writings did more than those of anyone else to prepare the dogmatic foundations for the liturgical movement," *Orate Frates*, XVII, 13, note 1. *The Glories of Divine Grace*, has been published in the English translation of the Rev. Patrick Shaughnessy, O.S.B., by The Grail Press, St. Meinrad, Indiana.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. Conducted since 1928 by the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Benedict's Convent, Crookston, Minnesota.
2. Pastor of St. Joseph's Church from January, 1905, to 1910.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. The following remarks on the Benedictine Order and life are based chiefly on Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Benedictine Monachism*, London 1919, and Dom Justin McCann, *Saint Benedict*, London,

1938; the best general history of the Order is that of Dom Philibert Schmitz, *Histoire de l'Ordre de Saint-Benoit*, 4 volumes, Liege, 1948-1949.

2. Rather than 543, which was based on a miscalculation from Roman dates.
3. Pope St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, II, 33-34.
4. The following facts are based on an article by Sister Margretta Nathe, "The Newly-Organized Congregation of St. Benedict," *Benedictine Review* (Winter 1949), 29-31. See also Colman Barry, O.S.B., *Worship and Work*, St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1956, and Sister Grace McDonald, O.S.B., *With Lamps Burning*, North Central Publishing Co., St. Paul, 1957.
5. Mother Benedicta died in 1862, and is buried in the convent cemetery at St. Benedict's.
6. In 1947 the convent at Bismarck, founded in 1878, became an independent Diocesan Institute. The same year a rescript from the Holy See gave Mother Rosamond Pratschner authority to found two or more independent priories; after several months of prayer and deliberation, each sister volunteered for the house of her choice on January 15, 1948. Eighty-three sisters went to St. Bede's Priory, Eau Claire, Wisconsin; 178 went to St. Paul's Priory, St. Paul, Minnesota; and 915 remained at St. Benedict's.
7. It is generally regarded as the oldest order in the Church; for the claims of the Carmelite Order to the same honor, see my *Elias: A Study in Character*, Chicago, 1948, 30-32.
8. *Reception of Novices*, St. Joseph, Minnesota, 1938.

9. No longer in formal use by the Benedictines; in some orders they are an essential part of the religious name.
10. The feast of March 21 always falls within the penitential season of Lent.
11. *Conversio*, originally *conversatio*. See Dom Justin McCann, *op. Cit.*, 147-168; "the [religious] in taking it promises to discipline his life according to the monastic programme. It is the most comprehensive of the three vows," *ibid.*, 145.
12. See *The Catholic Daily Tribune*, July 3, 1932; the document itself seems to have disappeared.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. Because every examination of discharges, such as that dated March 26, 1926, showed simple pus-forming bacilli, B. Subtilis, and streptococci.
2. See A.A. Tanquerey, P.S.S., *La divinisation de la souffrance*, Paris, 1931; M.C. D'Arcy, S.J., *The Pain of This World and the Providence of God*, London, 1935; and C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, London, 1942.
3. Quoted in Vital Lehodey, O.C.R., *Holy Abandonment*, Dublin, 1948, 167.
4. Letter of the Rev. Alfred Laplante, C.S.C., August 10, 1949.
5. This relic was removed by the Bishop of Crookston and presented to St. Joseph's Church in Moorhead after the death of Sister Annella's parents.

6. The reviewer in *Sponsa Regis*, 18:3 (November 15, 1946), 71, taking this needle-work as a symbol of Sister Annella's message of resignation to suffering, remarked very appropriately, "May God do so in our lifetime!"
7. Her brother, who died when nine days old, in 1908.
8. The poem continues:
That sorrow has darkened
The pathway I trod;
That thorns, not roses,
Were strewn o'er the sod;
That anguish of spirit
Full often was mine,
Since anguish of spirit
So often was Thine,
My cherished Rabboni!
How glad I shall be
To die with the hope
Of a welcome from Thee. Amen.
9. An interesting discussion of St. Walburga's oil by John Henry Cardinal Newman may be found in Note B (to p.21), 269ff, and Note 7 (to p. 273) , 349-352, the latter incorporating a letter from the Rev. Corbinian Wandinger, in *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, edited by Charles Frederick Harrold, New York, 1947.
10. Because of Mrs. Zervas's fear that bed-sores would be added to Sister Annella's already tortured body.
11. The practice of saying thirty consecutive Masses for the Dead to obtain the release of a soul in Purgatory, should it be there, is attributed to Pope St. Gregory the Great.

12. Mrs. Zervas, who managed to show the fewest signs of repugnance at the odor, wrote of it, "You could not get it from your nose or throat for days," and said that it often gave her headaches; all Sister Annella's clothes had to be aired for long periods of time before the odor was no longer noticeable.
13. Sixty-two pounds has sometimes been considered the absolute minimum possible for a person twenty-six years of age to sustain life.

NOTES TO EPILOGUE

1. Now in Worthington, Ohio, the site of the Pontifical Josephinum.
2. The translation from the German here, as in the letter of the Bishop of Speyer which follows, is my own.
3. A translation of the canticle by Mr. Zervas, dated August 31, 1939, reads:
Wait my soul
Wait for the Lord,
Recommend all to Him
Gladly He will help you!
When everything breaks,
God will not abandon you,
Greater than the Helper
The need will never be,
In all storms, in all needs,
He will protect you,
The loyal God!
(For the word 'abandon,' he had put first 'forsake.')
4. In his preface to *Soeur Marie-Annette Zervas*, O.S.B., Québec, 1945, translated by the Rev. Alphonse Breault, O.M.I.



At twenty-three years old, Sister Annella Zervas, OSB, began suffering from an excruciating skin disease. Though this disease was debilitating and painful, she stayed true to the will of God. When she would pray, she refused to ask for healing, praying only for the strength to endure her suffering. She suffered for Jesus.

Even in her misery, she trusted that God had a plan. Those who visited her left changed, convinced they had been in the presence of someone holy. After three years of suffering, the disease took over, and she passed at only twenty-six years old. Through her brief, poignant life, Sister Annella shows the profound values of the Church: humility, faith, and a heart fixed on God.

Now, Sister Annella Zervas is on the path to sainthood. This biography details her story and shows how her devotion to Jesus continues to move hearts and deepen faith.



SISTER
ANNELLA
GUILD