

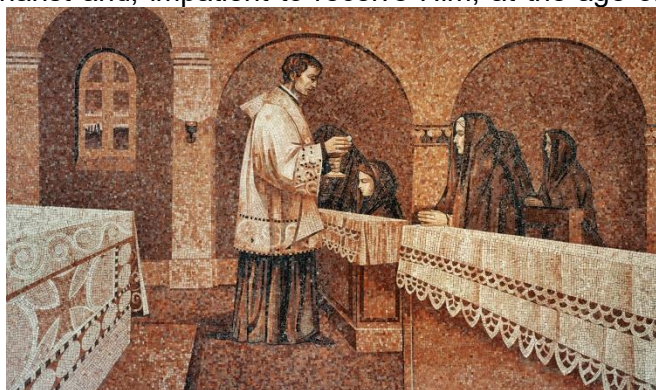
SAINT GELTRUDE COMENSOLI: THE EUCHARIST AT THE CENTRE OF A LIFE

Caterina Comensoli was born in **Bienno** (Brescia) on **18 January 1847** into a modest but respectable family. Of the ten children, only Bartolomea, Cristina and Caterina survived. At the time, the village was still under Austrian rule and had been allotted to the Province of Bergamo.

Her father, Carlo Comensoli, worked in one of the many forges as an ironworker and her mother, Anna Maria Milesi, was a dressmaker.

The family was very religious; in fact, they passed on a firm and deep faith to their daughters. Her spiritual growth was thus fostered by the family climate imbued with a firm religiosity and a simple, well-ordered moral life.

Since childhood, she showed a particular **attraction to the Eucharist**. She was impressed by the catechesis on the Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and, impatient to receive Him, at the age of seven, one morning, very early, she entered the little church in Bienno where they were celebrating Mass. Wrapped in a shawl; she approached the balustrade mixing with the people and received her **First Communion 'furtively'**. She herself describes this episode with emotion in her Autobiography; she says, *"Impossible for the pen to describe those moments"*.



Trento Longaretti: the furtive communion

Catherine was very diligent in performing household chores, particularly sewing. She loved silence and solitude, but she also had a friendly, cheerful character and was always willing to offer help. At an early age, she felt

attracted by the religious vocation, so much so that she decided to take the vow of virginity. She herself recounts this particular moment of her childhood. *"During the 'Forty-Hours', I could not stay outside the Church. One morning, feeling a strong desire for Him, I got up on time, and accompanied, I was the first to enter the church. Once there, I said to Him with great enthusiasm, 'You will always be my spouse;...I swear to you a million times that I will always be yours and if I am ever unfaithful to you, then take me first. I swore eternal love; I swore I would always be a virgin. I did not know what virginity meant because I was only seven years old'"*.

Catherine quickly demonstrated a lively intelligence, and showed great interest in catechesis and the activities organised in the parish "oratory". Her education was skilfully completed in the Bienno Primary School of which the parish priest was Director; Caterina attended the school with dedication and profit. In it, she learnt to read, so she could personally approach the biographies of the saints who inspired her to imitate their examples.

In Bienno, they had started the experience of the girls' oratory, which offered girls an intense programme of spiritual life. It was in this context that Caterina matured the decision to enter the Institute of the **Sisters of Charity of Lovere**, when she was only fifteen, after overcoming the resistance of her parents who considered her too young.

Unfortunately, Catherine had to go back to her family only a few months later due to serious health problems.

For the young woman, a period of suffering and distress began in which she experienced moments of inner aridity.

She reacted to this challenge by renewing her trust in God and accepting her situation as His will: she still experienced moments of strong spiritual intensity and reconfirmed her decision to give herself to the Lord.

In 1866, she entered the **Company of Saint Angela Merici**, where she became mistress of the novices of the Company in Bienno.

In 1869, her father fell seriously ill and Catherine needed to provide help for the family, so she left Bienna for Chiari (Brescia) in order to work as a maid in the family of Father Giovanni Battista Rota, who had three sisters belonging to the Company of Saint Angela Merici.

In 1874, her mother begged her to go to the Counts Fè Vitali who, at that time, lived in **Milan** in the Palazzo in Corso Venezia 36. The invitation had come from Countess Ippolita Fè, sister-in-law of the noble family Simoni of Bienna. Catherine was asked to take on the role of lady-in-waiting and also to take care of the two young sons, Bartholomew and Julius.

Count Gian Battista Vitali was a wealthy landowner and had estates in Capriate San Gervasio, where he used to spend the summer months with his family and servants, so avoiding the heat of Milan.



Trento Longaretti: Caterina Comensoli and Pope Leone XIII

Catherine looked after the children and followed Countess Ippolita on her travels: Milan, Brescia, Bergamo, San Gervasio d'Adda and to various spa resorts. She remained at her service for eight years.

By now, she had become a wise woman, rich in human skills and inner sensitivity, inclined to a profound spirituality.

Count Marco Antonio Fe' Ostiani proposed to her but Catherine had not renounced her ideal of consecrating herself to God and politely declined.

In the meantime, her love for the Eucharist had led her to organise, in **San Gervasio d'Adda**, the "Guard of Honour" in order to spread the cult of the Sacred Heart and to experience intense moments of Eucharistic adoration in the parish church with its members.

Between 1877 and 1879, Catherine's parents died and she returned to her project of religious life. She had developed the idea of founding a congregation devoted to perpetual adoration; she was attracted to the cloistered life.

In the winter of 1880, during a pilgrimage to Rome, she obtained an audience with **Pope Leo XIII** and confided her project to him: the Pope encouraged her, but also invited her to take over the care of young female workers who were in a difficult social and religious situation at the time.

The ideal of founding an Institute dedicated to Adoration and to the education of children and young people matured in her increasingly; this idea was realised when she met **Fr Francesco Spinelli** in Bergamo.

At the time, a priest was indeed needed as a Superior to ensure the proper functioning of a women's religious institute.

Her meeting with Father Francesco enabled Catherine to make her project concrete and, after obtaining the approval of the Bishop of Bergamo, Monsignor Gaetano Camillo Guindani, the Institute of the 'Adorers Sisters' was officially founded on **15 December 1882**.

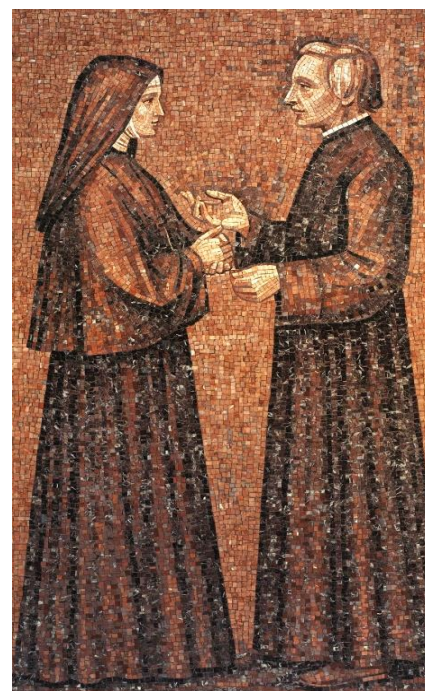
Catherine assumed the name of Mother Geltrude

In the city and diocese, the initiative was well received. The Mother House was established in Bergamo in what was then Via Cavette, but other houses were opened in other parts of the city.

Everything seemed to be going well when, in **1889**, a financial failure caused the two Founders to separate.

St. Gertrude, with the seventy-three sisters who remained with her, continued to lead the Institute of the "Sacramentine Sisters of Bergamo" in Bergamo, and Fr. Francis, with another group of sisters, continued to direct the Institute of the "Suore adoratrici" Adorers Sisters in Rivolta d'Adda.

On 19 January 1889, St Gertrude wrote in her personal notes, "This is the day of the terrible catastrophe ...



Trento Longaretti: Madre Geltrude Comensoli and Don Francesco Spinelli

On 19 January 1889, Saint Gertrude wrote in her personal notes, *"This is the day of the terrible catastrophe... My Jesus, in a few minutes they will be [here], they are coming to seal everything up... Support me in this hard trial; help me... Men seal our things. You seal my heart, in your most sweet and lovable Heart, do not remove me from there any more... always keep me, my beloved Jesus, Fiat voluntas tua. Amen". "...You will support my poor Institute if it pleases You." "You alone can lift me up, You alone can help me. I only trust in You. God alone!"*

Everything seemed to be falling apart, but Mother Gertrude, after a short period of dismay, reacted with faith and resilience, trusting in the Divine Providence.

Although she had to take refuge in Lodi with the sisters who remained with her, she never lost hope of returning to the Mother House in Bergamo.

The bishop of Lodi, Monsignor Giovanni Battista Rota, originally from Chiari, in whose family Comensoli had been a housemaid in her youth, gave her concrete and caring support, thanks also to the help of the bishop of Bergamo, Monsignor Camillo Guindani.

Thanks to them, **on September 8, 1891**, by a decree, the Institute of the Sacramentine Sisters of Bergamo was canonically erected in Lodi and the Mother House was established temporarily in Lavagna di Comazzo.

In 1892, Geltrude Comensoli took over the lease of the first house in Bergamo in Via Cavette and brought back there, after two years, the Mother House, the birthplace of the Congregation.

After this difficult and troubled period, the Institute gradually developed. By the time of Mother Geltrude's death, sixteen houses had been opened with one hundred and seventy-nine sisters. They assisted female workers in boarding houses, spinning mills, weaving mills and other workshops, orphans, underage girls who had acted against the law, students in boarding houses, the elderly in nursing homes, pellagra patients; they worked in economic kitchens, and also taught gold embroidery. They also operated in parishes and oratories, taught in various municipal schools; they also opened schools of study and sewing, and organized after-school programs.

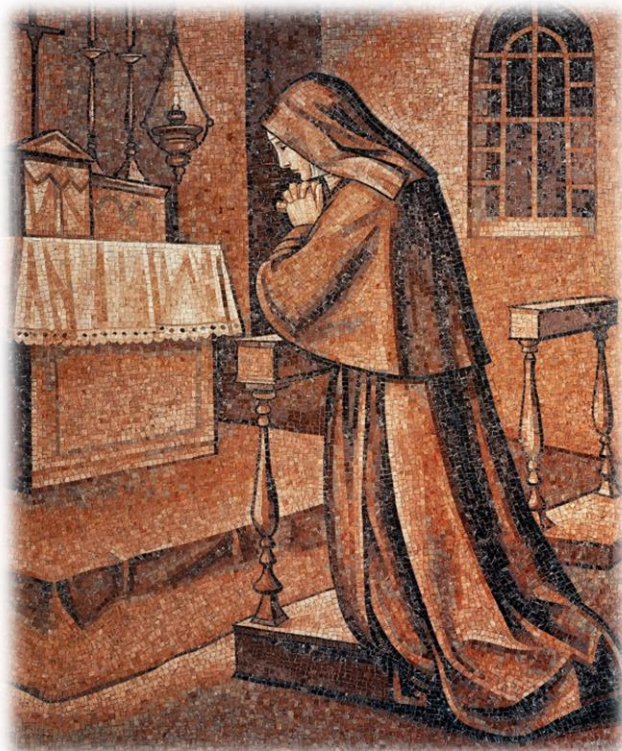
Mother Gertrude obtained the first papal approval of the Institute in the Decree of Praise of 11 April 1900 and was promulgated by Leo XIII.

By that time she had given all the guarantees of continuity for the public and perpetual Adoration to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, she had endowed her sisters with her precious spiritual heritage of prayer, humility and charity, especially towards the poor, and she was preparing herself to meet Jesus whom she had loved and served all her life.

At noon on **18 February 1903**, bending her head towards the small open window in her room so that she could always contemplate Jesus in the Eucharist in the adjoining church, she died at the age of only fifty-six.

The Decree of pontifical approval of the Institute was given in 1906 and the approval of the Constitutions in 1910; both were issued by Pope Pius X, whom Mother Gertrude had met when he was archbishop of Venice.

She was declared **Venerable** for the Heroic Virtues by Pope John XXIII on 26 April 1961, proclaimed **Blessed** by Pope John Paul II on 1 October 1989 and a **Saint** by Pope Benedict XVI on 26 April 2009.



Trento Longaretti: Mother Geltrude in adoration