



**Saint  
Gemma  
Galgani**

**John Paul Kirkham**

# **Saint Gemma Galgani**

by

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## Introduction

*May the Passion of Christ be always in our hearts*

The emblem of the Passionists Religious Order displays a white heart and Cross of purity. The Cross over the heart indicating that hearts dedicated to Christ must expect to be at the foot of the Cross and be united with it. The words translate as "Passion of Jesus" and the three nails remind us of His suffering set against the black background as in mourning for the death of The Saviour. In the history of the church it is rare for a saint to have shared so closely in the Lords Passion and one of the very elect few is Gemma Galgani.

Gemma a name derived from *gem*, a precious and beautiful stone. Gemma Galgani was the very first canonised saint to have lived in the twentieth century and from birth to death at the young age of twenty five despite her many infirmities portrayed a fine image. The art of photography was young but the many descriptions and pictures taken reveal a radiance of striking beauty. Unusual for the Italian her eyes, often raised to heaven were a bright and piercing azure blue and her long hair soft brown. A young girl who lived her life hidden away in

relative obscurity would eventually touch the lives of many and still does today. Orphaned of a loving mother at only seven years of age Gemma matured quickly and would rise to the highest state of sanctity that the church can recognise. This humble servant of God became a mystic, visionary, and ecstatic and was allowed by Christ to unite with Him and suffer the wounds of His Passion by displaying the Stigmata and more as her own physical heart would reveal after death.

In reading this biography of St. Gemma some of the events will appear fantastic and supernatural but all of Gemma's mystical experiences and ecstasies were either witnessed, recorded or transcribed by not only those close to her but also by the church authorities under the guidance of her spiritual director the Venerable Fr. Germanus, C.P. and have been well documented remembering also that Gemma's life reached into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modern times. Gemma under religious guidance was also instructed by Fr. Germanus to write down her form of life from childhood to the age of twenty three and all of her diaries, letters and prayers survive as a testimony to a life consecrated to Christ. Her words were often addressed to Christ Himself and the Blessed Virgin and

Gemma was rewarded by the singular gift of heavenly and divine visions and locutions with the Lord, the Mother of God and her Guardian Angel and each of the following chapters will open and conclude with some of our saints own compositions which draw us closer to her profound and spiritual prayer life that displayed such great sadness and immense joy.

Gemma's many illnesses would mean that her wish to enter various religious orders would always result in rejection. Towards the end of her shortly numbered days Gemma urgently desired to join the Passionists Nuns of St. Paul (of the Cross) but events only ever allowed her to remain a laywoman. As we shall discover however, her prophetic words would strike true as she said "*though you would not have me in life, you will in death*" and after her life ended and her bodily remains having been adopted by the Passionists it was Pope Benedict XV who confirmed that "if not by habit and profession, undoubtedly by desire and affection, Gemma is rightly numbered among the religious children of St. Paul of the Cross".

A special word of thanks in writing this new biography goes to Sister Mary of the Sisters of St. Gemma's Convent in Lucca who shared her precious time, fathomless knowledge, insights and reflections while showing me around the Giannini home that between 1900 and 1903 was the last residence of Gemma Galgani; and in allowing such personal access to the rooms, Gemma's original belongings, stigmatic stained clothes, writings and providing me with invaluable resource material and a relic of St. Gemma. Thank you also to the St. Gemma Galgani Museum and repository at the Sanctuary of St. Gemma for information, allowing photography and presenting me with English prayer translations and a fragment of St. Gemma Galgani's original wooden coffin. And finally to the warm setting of Lucca as it was on a previous visit to this beautiful city that the seeds of inspiration were planted to write the story of St. Gemma Galgani ..... John Paul Kirkham

*"I shall love You.*

*I shall love You always. When day breaks, when evening turns into night, at every hour, at every moment I shall love You always, always, always"*

*St. Gemma Galgani*

## **The Walled City of Lucca – Home of the Saints**

*“Dear Jesus, I love you so much. I shall endeavour always to love You; I shall live to love You; I shall die to love You! .....Give me wings oh Jesus, so I can fly to Your throne”*

Lucca, the birthplace of Puccini, famous for its virgin olive oil and well preserved medieval city walls that create a circular tree lined three mile garden promenade completely enclosing the intricate and graceful pattern of weaving streets containing many architectural treasures in a multitude of piazzas containing beautiful Basilica's, Cathedral's, pink hue stone Churches, villas and aromatic gardens. Lucca sits in the region of Tuscany amid a wide fertile plain benefiting from a Mediterranean climate being so close to the sea at Viareggio. Pisa is the gateway and Lucca only twelve miles to the north is easily accessible by road and regular train and bus services via Pisa's Galileo Galilei International Airport.

Lucca can trace its birth and early origins to the Ligurians, Etruscans and Romans with its name deriving from the Ligurian Celtic “luck” meaning “area of marshes”. Between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Centuries BC under

the Romans, Lucca became an important centre for trade and commerce and was a Latin colony that Caesar knew well.

As the era of Christianity dawned and having converted to Catholicism it was under the Longobards that the area was first divided into Dioceses and Parishes thus increasing its political and economic growth when it became well known throughout the world for its beautiful silks and fabrics.

Lucca through the middle ages and Renaissance period became an independent republic fighting off various advances from the Florentines as Firenze (Florence) is only thirty miles from its eastern gate. After passing through the hands of Napoleon and later the Austrians, Lucca was finally ceded to Tuscany in 1847 as its regional capitol and became part of the Italian Kingdom.

Lucca has always had a noble tradition of saints and relics associated with its history. The Basilica of San Frediano that branches off the exceptional and elliptical shaped square of the Anfiteatro Romano houses the tomb of Saint Frediano who was an early 6<sup>th</sup> Century Irish Bishop of Lucca. The Basilica also contains the tomb of our own English

St. Richard whom the Italians claim as a king. St. Richard was the father of Saint's Willibald, Winnebald, and Walburga. He was on a pilgrimage to Rome from his native Wessex, England, with his two sons when he was stricken with fever and died in Lucca. Miracles were reported at his tomb and he became greatly venerated by the local citizens. The incorrupt body of St. Zita, Lucca's patron saint is displayed in a glass reliquary in her own large chapel within San Frediano for public veneration. Lucca is also the home and resting place of St. John Leonardi, pharmacist, priest and founder of the Clerks Regular of the Mother of God and his remains are on view in the Romanesque built Church of Santa Maria Corteorlandini with its richer more recent Baroque interior also containing a replica of the Holy House of Loreto. The Duomo (Cathedral) of San Martino houses a larger than life size crucifix for pilgrims; the "Volto Santo" (The Holy Face) by which tradition holds was carved out of dark Lebanon cedar by Nicodemus with the face of Christ being finished by angels.

Today in the age of mass travel, tourism and pilgrimages nearly all move quickly through Pisa with its leaning tower and hasten to

Florence, Siena and the recuperative spas of Montecatini Terme leaving Lucca out completely. Lucca therefore can rightly be called the hidden gem of Tuscany with its quiet and tranquil pace of life sharing its beauty from within as one admires the amber glow of the terracotta roof tiles from sunrise to dusk set against the Alpi Apuane hills and mountains to its north.

Saint Pio of Pietrelcina had a special devotion to this city's St. Gemma Galgani whom he called the "Great Saint" and when he talked about her was often moved to tears and would always advise and send pilgrims especially those who came from Tuscany to go to Lucca and informed them as follows "why come to me when such a remarkable saint already exists in your midst" and so it is in Lucca that the story of such a saint begins and ends.

*"Oh, if all were to know how beautiful Jesus is, how loving He is! They would all die of love. And yet, how is it that He is so little loved? Oh, it is time lost to be with creatures. Our heart is made to love one thing only, our great God. Oh Lord, what are all the consolations of the earth without You?"*

## Precious Gemma

*"Whoever feeds on Jesus shall live of His life ..... When Jesus, then, comes to me  
I shall no longer live in myself because He will live in me"*

### Birth

Slightly north east of Lucca is the tiny village of Borgo Nuovo di Camigliano where in the Via della Chiesa Henri Galgani lived with his young wife Aurelia. Henry was a pharmacist, something he shared in common with his ancestor St. John Leonardi. The family were blessed with eight children, five boys and three girls. Maria Gemma Umberta Pia Galgani born on the 12<sup>th</sup> March 1878 was the fourth child and eldest daughter and being the custom was baptised the day after birth by Don Pietro Quilichi, parish priest in Camigliano's Church of St. Michael. The name Gemma was given (precious gemstone) as both parents were overjoyed to finally have a daughter to call their own.

Within two months the Galgani's decided to move to the nearby City of Lucca as this was thought to be a more profitable environment to bring up a young and expanding family and in May 1878 the family took up residence within the city walls at 23 Via del Biscione (now the Via Santa

Gemma Galgani) just off the Via Filungo opposite the Northern Porta (gate) and Piazza of Santa Maria. A private half boarding school was found and at the age of two, Gemma was taking instruction and education from the Vallini sisters, Emilia and Helen. By the age of five, instead of following the normal timetable of playing games, sports and recreational amusements, Gemma would occupy herself reading the Breviary with particular attention to the Office of Readings of The Blessed Virgin and the Office of the Dead. The city at this time was besieged by a deadly outbreak of whooping cough which invaded the school and it was through the ardent prayers of the very young Gemma that the epidemic seemed to vanish without having affected any of the boarders or staff.

Mother and daughter Aurelia and Gemma were inseparable such was their loving devotion to one another. Aurelia was a very devout Christian who enjoyed a life of prayer centered on the daily Eucharist and it was Gemma who let it be known that it was to her mother that she owed all, her knowledge of God, the Crucifixion of Jesus and the love of virtues. Prayers were shared between mother and daughter

throughout the day and Gemma never tired of hearing sermons that were preached in church. Whilst preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) Gemma would at a young age show a deep sense of sorrow even for her tiniest faults. Throughout Gemma's primary education, Aurelia had been suffering from tuberculosis, something that had been kept secret from the younger children but as the disease moved into its latter stages "mama" asked Gemma how she felt about journeying to God with her when she died and the loving daughter's response showed a delight in anticipation of herself being able to *"travel to paradise, with Jesus and His Angels"* and when Aurelia was moved into medical isolation, against strict advice Gemma would stay her mother's bedside.

### Confirmation and First Holy Communion

In the historical centre of Lucca stands the city focal point, the ornate white limestone Romanesque Basilica of San Michele a Foro with St. Michael standing tall and dominating atop. It is here after a period of catechetical instruction in the faith that Gemma under the 12<sup>th</sup> century hand painted icon crucifix received from Archbishop Monsignor

Nicholas Ghilardi the Sacrament of Confirmation on May 26<sup>th</sup> 1885. It was during the Confirmation that Gemma received her first divine experience and locution with Jesus as He asked Gemma to give up her dear mother to Him. Gemma replied *"yes, provided you take me also"*. But Jesus wanted an unconditional giving telling her that she would be taken to heaven later and so she answered *"yes"* to this self sacrificing request to relinquish the person she loved most. Aurelia lingered onto life for a further four months and died on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1886 at the age of thirty nine.

After a temporary stay with her mother's sister Aunt Helen Landini, Gemma returned home in time for Christmas to join the Sisters of St. Zita with the aim of finishing her education under the guidance of Blessed Elena Guerra that allowed a plentiful and rich supply of pious instruction. First Holy Communion at this time was normally the reserve of older children but Gemma's persistent and ardent desire to be united with Jesus in the Sacrament of the Altar won through and special permission was obtained from her Confessor Fr. John Volpi (later Bishop of Arrezzo). Her preparation involved a ten day retreat in a convent and

learning so much about the suffering of Jesus caused Gemma so much pain that she had to retire to bed for a full day. On the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, June 17<sup>th</sup> 1887 aged nine years Gemma made her First Holy Communion in Lucca's glistening mosaic Basilica of San Frediano and wrote down the following resolutions.

- 1. I will confess my sins and receive Holy Communion each time as it was my last.*
- 2. I will often visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, particularly when afflicted.*
- 3. I will prepare for every Feast of Our Blessed Lady by some mortification, and every evening I will ask my Heavenly Mother's blessing.*
- 4. I will endeavour to keep always in the presence of God.*
- 5. Every time the clock strikes I will repeat three times: My Jesus, mercy.*

Never at school did Gemma ever lose her temper or cause an argument and when blamed for any upheaval would just simply say even if not guilty "*I will be good and not do it again*". On learning about instruments of penance she wished to mortify her young self but was forbidden and when she arrived home each day would always recite the rosary on her

knees and recommend her soul to Jesus. Gemma was a bright student and would eventually be awarded the schools Gold Prize in Religious Education and following a course of spiritual exercises resolved in her little notebook to:

1. *To make a visit every day to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, speaking to Him more with my heart than with my tongue.*
2. *I will make every effort not to speak of indifferent things, but often of the things of heaven.*

### Sadness

Sadly, tragedy was about to strike the family again as Gino her elder brother and seminarian contracted tuberculosis and with Gemma constantly nursing him despite the risk of contagion died in September 1894. Gemma became ill and weak for months after Gino's death and at sixteen was unable to finish her education and never returned to school again. The young Gemma always showed compassion to the poor and would give any money she had to those she met who were needy; if without money herself then she would substitute bread, flour or other bits of food and when any poor person knocked at the door Gemma

would even start giving away the household items. Gemma was given a present of a gold watch, cross and chain by a relative but on arriving home found herself in the presence of her Guardian Angel who told her “the precious ornaments that adorn the spouse of the Crucified King cannot be other than the thorns and the Cross” and from that point promised for the love of Jesus never to wear or speak of things of vanity ever again, a promise she kept to the end of her life.

*“My Jesus ..... The more I think of my worthlessness, the more I lose myself in astonishment and find nothing to bring me peace, until I fly to you in your infinite mercy. My Jesus, Mercy!”*

## **A Suffering Servant**

*“If God had left the choice to me I would have preferred to escape from the body and fly to heaven. Every time a fever came upon me and I felt ill I experienced a great consolation. But this changed to sorrow when, after some illness, I would feel my strength return. During this same year another desire began to grow in me. I began to feel an ever greater yearning to love Jesus Crucified very much, and at the same time a desire to suffer with him and to help him in his sufferings”.*

The above words of Gemma confirm that she had a calling to seek heaven and to suffer as Christ suffered and when often weakened or sick seemed happy and would grieve each time a recovery was made. It is difficult perhaps for us to comprehend this reverse desire in human terms and this can be best described as a supernatural will that is rare even among the great saints of the church.

In 1896 Gemma was struck down with an excruciating painful foot. Her diseased limb had succumbed to necrosis and the infection was starting to spread. A surgeon was quickly called for and was horrified by the gangrenous sight presented to him and his first impulse was to

amputate. However, he decided to operate by removing the infected tissues and bone, all done without any anaesthesia as Gemma refused to take chloroform, preferring instead to bear the intense pain courageously. The operation proved successful.

Henry Galgani by his own nature was a kind and generous benefactor to all who asked and unfortunately became a victim to the many who took advantage of his compassion. By the deception and fraud of others poor Henry found himself bankrupt with all of his assets seized. Shortly after he developed cancer of the throat and died on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1897. The bailiffs quickly moved in and took possession all of the family property and goods leaving the remaining Galgani children destitute; Gemma was now nineteen and an orphan.

The only resolve was to leave Lucca and gratefully accept the invitation to live with her rich Aunt Carolina in the town of Camaiore. Her new opulent surroundings did not fill her with joy and Gemma insisted on working in the house and praying in the local Abbey. A rich suitor came forward with a good intention and a proposal of marriage but this was met with a sharp refusal and an immediate desire to leave and go

straight back to Lucca. Gemma was now feeling unwell with severe pains in her head and neck and after great insistence made her own return to Lucca and the deserted remains of the old family home.

### Grave Illness

No sooner had she returned than curvature of the spine and meningitis was diagnosed and her sense of hearing vanished. Large abscesses appeared on her head, chest and side and Gemma lost her long hair and became a paralytic. Medical practitioners after various consultations regarded the case as "incurable".

A visitor to Gemma's sickbed brought her a book about the holy life of a Passionists seminarian called Gabriel Possenti who would himself be canonised at a later date. *Note: Saint Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows (Possenti) was born in Assisi in 1838. While very young, he attended school at Spoleto and seemed to be strongly attracted to the World. However, under the call of God's grace, he entered the Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ where he lived so crucified to the world and so intimately united to God that he became a model of all the virtues, especially humility and obedience. He had a very great devotion to the Sorrowful Virgin who was, as it were, the whole*

*reason for his holiness. He died of tuberculosis at Isola of Gran Sasso in the Abruzzi on February 27<sup>th</sup> 1862. He was 24 years of age and had not yet completed his studies for the priesthood. Near his tomb, there rose a large sanctuary, a place of faith, pilgrimages and a centre of religious influence. He was canonised in 1920 and became the Patron Saint of the youth of Italy.*

During the illness the “Enemy” appeared for the first time offering to cure her and give her all she desired if only she would do his will. At her lowest point the Devil was using subtle temptation. As the evil spirit returned, a more ferocious battle took place but Gemma seeing through the deception invoked Gabriel Possenti’s protection with the sign of the cross and peace returned. Gemma would read over and over this wonderful book and keep a picture of Brother Gabriel under her pillow. The time came for a tearful Gemma to give back the little book to its owner but a reward was in sight. Br. Gabriel appeared to her for the first time dressed in white and opening his garment revealed himself clothed in the Passionists garb telling her to be good and that he would return and allowed her to kiss his habit and rosary. A year passed by and Gemma was cared for by her immediate family and the nursing Sisters

of St. Camillus de Lellis. During this period and after a great deal of persuasive reasoning Gemma was finally allowed by her Confessor to make a vow of purity (chastity). Later that same night Br. Gabriel appeared at the foot of her bed saying “Gemma, make the vow to be a Religious gladly, but add nothing else” and called her “My Sister”. He then held the woollen heart emblem of the Passionists for her to kiss and placed it on the sheet over her heart before disappearing.

### Miraculous Cure

As the meningitis worsened, the doctors tried in vain to operate on the abscess in her side and cauterise her spine in twelve places, again without anaesthesia. Towards the end of January 1899 a brain tumour had developed and due to the grave weakness of Gemma’s frail body the idea of any further surgery was abandoned. In February Holy Viaticum (The Last Rite) was given and life expectancy beyond that immediate midnight was not deemed possible. Hanging on to life for several days Gemma made a novena prayer to the Blessed (later canonised) Margaret Mary Alcoque. Around the midnight hour Br. Gabriel appeared with his rosary and placed his hand on her forehead.

He prayed the "Our Father" and "Gloria" nine times and then asked her "Do you want to be cured?" "Yes" was the answer and in reply Br. Gabriel said, "You will be cured. Pray with faith to the Heart of Jesus. Every evening until the novena is finished I will be here with you and we will pray to the Sacred Heart of Jesus together". This happened for the prescribed nine consecutive nights. On the last day of the novena prayer Gemma made her confession and confined to bed took Holy Communion. Jesus then asked her "Do you want to be cured?" and Gemma replied in her heart "*Whatever You will*" and the miraculous cure of the life threatening malignancy was instantaneous.

### The Desire for Holy Orders

Now cured and after many years of longing Gemma put her mind and energy into what she desired most in the world, to become a fully professed religious sister. During her illness there had been a close attachment to the different Orders of the Sisters of St. Camillus, The Passionists and the Visitandines (also known as the Nuns of the Visitation of Mary or Salesians). It seemed that the whole of Lucca was talking about the remarkable cure and the Visitandines invited Gemma

to their convent with the intended offer of a vocation in the not too distant future and the promise of the noviciate after a time of spiritual preparation.

On the Easter Holy Thursday 1899 our humble servant vowed to make a Holy Hour every Thursday evening in honour of The Lord's Passion which she maintained for the rest of her life. As she sat praying and weeping a vision firstly of Jesus Crucified and bleeding and then Christ showing His five open wounds asked Gemma "Do you see this Cross, these thorns, these nails, these bruises, these tears, these wounds, this blood? They are all works of love and of infinite love. Do you see how much I have loved you? Do you really want to love me? Then first learn to suffer. It is by suffering that one learns to love".

Although a guest in the convent, Gemma took part in all aspects of the Sisters daily routine in the praying of the Divine Office, work duties and meditation. But still, when the time came the local Archbishop would not allow her to remain in the enclosure, thinking her too weak to become a novice and her hopes were dashed again. Being an orphan Gemma was used to feelings of discouragement but what kept this

young girl strong were the words of Jesus to her following her cure: "My daughter I will always be with you, I will be your Father and She (The Blessed Virgin of Sorrows) will be your Mother ..... Come draw nearer to me, you are my daughter. Are you not happy to be the daughter of Jesus and Mary?" Jesus had already known her feelings of rejection and was now preparing her for a much higher and greater gift.

*"Who will give me the feathers of an eagle; who will give me the feathers of a dove so I may fly to you? ... You should give me, oh Jesus, the wings of contemplation. How am I going to fly to you? So many things to go through! ... Go through all creation; break these chains that prevent me from flying to you. There are many other things, oh Jesus that nourishes my soul when I contemplate them but in none of them do I remain satiated, in none do I find repose. Only in you, oh Jesus, only in you does this soul of mine find repose".*

## The Stigmata

*“The Blessed Angel, on Thursday evening, just before I began to suffer, came again. I tried to hide myself, to flee but the Angel then gave me courage; He took from his breast a sword and let me see it, and said that Jesus soon would put it through the cross in my poor heart. He had two beautiful crowns; one of thorns and one of lilies. He asked me which I desired. I wished to obey you, Father, and then I said that of Jesus. He raised the crown of thorns; I kissed it many times, smiling and weeping, and then the Angel went away.”*

And so on Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> June 1899 after receiving the Eucharist, Jesus informed Gemma that later that day on the Vigil of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart He would present her with a special grace. Gemma quickly made her confession and on returning home to the old house in Via del Biscione was filled with so much sorrow for all interior and exterior sins and all that Jesus had suffered to save her. Whilst in rapture, the Blessed Mother of God appeared followed by her Guardian Angel who told Gemma to make an act of contrition followed by Mary saying “Daughter, in the name of Jesus all your sins are forgiven”. Jesus then showed Himself with open wounds issuing flames of fire that touched

Gemma's hands, feet and heart. Gemma feeling that she was about to die of the pain fell to the floor supported by her heavenly Mother who covered her with her mantle. Gemma remained transfixed for several hours and then the Blessed Virgin kissed her forehead and all became silent.

Gemma with help from her Guardian Angel arose from the floor to find her bed but the pain in her limbs and heart was intense and blood flowed from the stigmatic wounds yet despite the agony she managed to hide the bleeding hands under gloves and went next day to Holy Communion. Shaken, she thought that she would soon expire of her life and the suffering continued until 3.00 pm Friday, the hour of The Lord's Passion. With the modern age of the 20<sup>th</sup> century approaching these supernatural phenomena would be given plenty of time to be studied and witnessed closely by the most eminent clerics, medics and theologians. From its initiation the Stigmata would repeat each Thursday evening and end on the following Friday at 3.00 pm without fail and this would continue for two years. The bleeding wounds were clearly visible through the palms and back of hands and through both

feet showing the pattern of single nail and the actual skin could be seen in detail “bursting open” either by degrees or instantly. The wound in Gemma’s side was in the form of a crescent as that of being pierced by a lance. This wound close to the heart was seen by very few for obvious reasons of modesty but blood flowed from it abundantly saturating her undergarments.

Jesus would place upon His chosen servant the mystical Crown of Thorns each Thursday evening causing blood droplets to flow from the punctured forehead whilst her blue eyes shed single tears of blood that streaked down the face. The marks of scourging that The Lord endured at the pillar in the Praetorium were also explicitly visible in degrees raging from striped bruising to open ragged lacerations exposing torn flesh to the bone whilst the issuing blood, drenched clothes and bed.

When the stigmatic ecstasy finished each Friday the flow of blood from all five major wounds would cease immediately with all of the flesh and broken tissues healing to form a normal but slightly paler coloured skin.

Two years later in 1901 Gemma’s spiritual director would order her under strict obedience to ask of Jesus and pray that the flow of stigmatic

blood may cease so that these signs may become hidden from the outside world and for her own health. At this specific request the blood suddenly stemmed, the wounds sealed and healed but till the end of her life the stigmata and wounds of the Passion would still be suffered but interiorly.

It is within this sharing of suffering therefore that is the key to understanding the sanctity of St. Gemma. *"It is not enough to look at the Cross or wear it, we must carry it in the depths of our hearts"* her words show that the real treasure that she found was not in the form of any self inflicted harm or pain to herself but in a willingness to participate in Jesus' suffering and accepting the will of God (Philippians: 3.10).

*"Jesus, if a sacrifice would be necessary to see you happy, does not doubt that I would do it. Have I not come into this world to cry always? Every day is strewn with crosses. Oh Holy Cross I have embraced you. It is true Jesus that if I think of what I have gone through as a child and then as I grew up I have always had crosses. How wrong are those who think that suffering is a misfortune"?*

## **An Understanding Home and Friends**

*“Oh Jesus, I see you greater than all the treasures of earth. Yes, my sweetest God, my most lovable Jesus: to my eyes you are greater than the greatest treasures on earth. How gladly I would unite with your angels. How gladly I would be consumed in your praises. How gladly I would remain always before you. But what do I say when I speak of you? ... I say what I can, never what I ought. And if I do not know how, will I stay silent? No, because my Jesus must be loved and honoured by everyone. Do not look at what I say with my mind; look inside me ... My every secret is known to you, oh Jesus ... So, are you certain that I love you more than the sky and the earth? For sure, all earthly things worthy of being loved exist only to glorify your heart”*

### **The Passionists Fathers**

Throughout the summer of 1899 Gemma had still not given up the hope despite the many setbacks of becoming a cloistered religious nun but as the weeks passed there seemed to be no opportunity of this happening and she received little consolation from her confessor Monsignor Volpi. Gemma would tell Jesus of her wish and was reassured by His words in

asking her to hide her desire in His heart because no one would ever be able to take it away.

During 1899 Pope Leo XIII had decreed that missions should be arranged in all of Italy's dioceses and the organisation of the mission to the city of Lucca fell in to the hands of the Passionists Fathers. At the end of June the Passionists arrived to prepare and open the mission in Lucca's large Duomo, the great Cathedral of San Martino and it is on entering the cathedral that the first thing that the people, old, young and many newcomers attending would have seen was the tall "Volto Santo" the Holy Face of the Crucifix carved by Nicodemus nearly two thousand years ago welcoming all into the refreshingly cool air providing at least a brief sojourn from the summer heat outside in the large piazza. Gemma had been attending a series of talks on the subject of the Sacred Heart in a parish elsewhere but on hearing about the mission rushed to attend the cathedral. The first impression overwhelmed her as she saw that the priests delivering the sermons were dressed in the same habits and emblem as that of her heavenly visitor and consoler Brother Gabriel of the Sorrows. Sitting in the cathedral with the translucent light refracted

through its deep blue stained glass windows and the sanctuary dome revealing the full glory of a pictorial scene of the eternal kingdom painted by past masters in a unique perspective must have appeared to Gemma that heaven itself was floating, suspended above her head ready to descend to earth.

On the final day of the mission, before Holy Communion Jesus asked Gemma's soul how she liked the priest's habit and would such a soul like to wear the same. Gemma's heart beating faster answered "*yes*" and Jesus confirmed that she would be a daughter of His Passion. Jesus then instructed her to reveal to the Passionists all that had happened to her as one from the Passionists Order would become "her father". Gemma hastened and sought out by divine provenance Fr. Cajetan of the Child Jesus and bore her soul before him. Fr. Cajetan agreed to consider and verify all of the facts put before him and made arrangements to return to Lucca in order to deliver his conclusions about her divine wounds. In the meantime Fr. Cajetan allowed this saintly looking girl to make private the three religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and asked her to report all the known hitherto secret facts regarding her

supernatural experiences and stigmata to her confessor and the local religious authorities.

In September 1899 Fr. Cajetan returned to Lucca as promised and upon further detailed investigations wrote extensively and conclusively, confirming along with the Provincial Superior General of the Passionists Fr. Peter Paul (later Archbishop of Camerino) in both providing the most definitive and authoritative accounts of the stigmata in Jesus' selected servant on earth.

### Gemma's New Family and Home

A great deal of the families in Lucca were of a pious disposition and this was shown by many of the houses displaying above their doors a sacred inscription or by having a more elaborate niche containing a religious icon, painting or statue which can still be seen today. In the unassuming but aptly named Via Seminario just behind the Cathedral of San Martino by the bastion gate of San Colombano lived Matteo and Giustina Giannini with their eleven children and Matteo's sister Cecilia in a very large four storey house with its typical Tuscan yellow plastered walls and green shutters facing the tree lined wall promenade. The family

would open their doors and receive any religious who were passing through Lucca and Fr. Cajetan who thus knew the Giannini's well suggested that Cecilia might take in the poor Gemma as a companion and spiritual daughter and in doing so become her new and adoptive mother giving this "angel from heaven" a place of refuge from the over zealous and curious who had heard about Gemma's mystical experiences. And it is due to the Giannini family's meticulous records and detailed archives and photographs that have left us today with such a rich wealth of material on Gemma's final three years including all of the saint's writings that run to many hundreds of pages along with the comprehensively documented, witnessed and recorded evidence of the stigmata and ecstasies. Gemma having been given permission from her aunts came to live permanently with her new family in September 1900 becoming the eldest of now "twelve" children. The only belongings she took with her were a spare black dress, a straw hat, some pieces of linen, a rosary, Crucifix and some devotional booklets.

Gemma whose simple metal framed cot bed faced the sunrise wished to start each day by visiting Jesus and with each dawns filtering light

reaching her pillow was always the first to rise in the house and within five minutes was washed at her simple basin, dressed in her black mantelet cape jacket and her tiny black cloth shoes in preparation to go to the first Mass of the day. Just behind the house in the Via Seminario lies just a few short metres away the little Church of the Santa Maria della Rosa affectionately known today as “Gemma’s Church” and it is here that Gemma would hear Mass twice daily always sitting in the same seat, the very last one at the back by the entrance door, and make her confession. The short distance to walk would prove to be a blessing as Gemma became weaker as time progressed.

The Giannini household had staff and maids but Gemma always insisted on helping the family by doing the most menial of chores, taking the form of a servant in helping with the cooking, washing, cleaning and fetching water from the garden well. Nothing seemed a burden as she would also take care of the sick in the house who were afflicted by infectious diseases, taking the time to bandage festering wounds and clean the sick and toilet areas.

Cecilia would encourage her adopted daughter to take fresh air and continue with the delicate work of the house as her new charge was an accomplished, seamstress and embroider who spun and produced Mass vestments from fine silver thread for visiting priests when they stayed and used the family chapel and to sew the emblems for the Passionists fathers. It gave Gemma great pleasure to assist as sacristan the occasionally residing priests by preparing the chapel and sacred vessels in readiness for the Holy Eucharist. When Cecilia was away from the house for any period of time Gemma's great delight was to find solitude in prayer in the private chapel or her own simply furnished room which offered a shaded afternoon cool respite from the long summer heat. Those who visited the house often would describe a modesty and luminance that radiated from Gemma's face as being "something that is not of this world".

Gemma had her own chair at the far end of the family dining table near the garden window. Being seated at the end gave her the excuse to retire to the kitchen frequently as she would only eat a few ounces of food and take a single spoonful of soup and when wishing to fast but not offend

her hosts made a hole in her spoon so that food might slip through unnoticed and even became an expert in the practice of pretending to eat. Gemma treated her new home as an enclosure, shunning visitors whenever possible and never taking up an invitation to go for a walk. She would only vacate the house to go to her daily Masses and evening Benediction, clearly demonstrating that her detachment from earthly things was complete. It was during a time of prayer to Jesus before the Blessed Sacrament that Gemma found herself before Him but He was not alone. Up to this point all of Gemma's religious confidants had been those that she had sought out herself, Mgr. Volpi and Fr. Cajetan but now God would choose a guide, as standing beside Jesus was "a man with white hair in a Passionists habit praying fervently". Jesus said "Daughter, do you know him"? Gemma replied negatively but Jesus then added that the priest in the vision would become her Spiritual Director and would be the person who would recognise in her the infinite work of His mercy. Shortly after, Gemma came across a small photograph of the priest that she recognised in the vision. This was the Passionists Fr. Germanus of St. Stanislaus who resided in Rome. It is at

this point that she started writing to him and eventually the correspondence along with an invitation from Mgr. Volpi persuaded Fr. Germanus to leave Rome and come to Lucca and stay in the Giannini household to see for himself this extraordinary young girl. This would also give the religious authorities an exclusive chance to observe any supernatural phenomena at close quarters and what was to follow would remain Fr. Germanus's sole mission for Gemma's last three years and for the rest of his own earthly life cumulating eventually in himself being declared "Venerable" among the saints.

Whilst Gemma preferred not to meet visitors to the Giannini's she would without exception always receive the poor who knocked at the door giving them bits from her own little food store and offering them words of holiness, teaching them about Jesus and encouraging them to return to the sacraments. When Gemma saw that a family member was ill and at the point when Cecilia would be later diagnosed with a tumour, the "earthly angel" offered to Jesus written prayers that she might take upon herself the martyrdom of suffering and pain of others

instead which she inevitably did thereby showing a living ministry of interceding for others.

*“My every secret is manifest to You, oh Jesus ... So are you certain that I love You more than the sky and the earth? Indeed, all earthly things worthy of being loved exist only to glorify Your heart. I have loved You, oh Jesus. Grant me to love You even more, so that my thoughts turn only to You, all day, and all night, even while sleeping ... I wish my spirit to talk always with You, my soul to converse always with You. I wish that my heart should always be enlightened with Your holy light; that You should be my love, my guide ... I wish to fly from virtue to virtue ... if not, then I shall be unable to come to Heaven to see You; it's been so long since I last saw You. But to come to Heaven requires purity of heart; give it to me, my Jesus ... Yes, I so desire purity of heart”.*



Top left: Gemma Galgani. Top Right: The Galgani house in Lucca.

Bottom left: Emblem of the Passionists. Bottom right: The Gianni home and present day convent



Top: Shrine of St. Gemma Galgani (Santa Maria de Rosa Church)

Middle: Gemma's pew on the back row of the Santa Maria de Rosa Church



Bottom: The tomb of St. Gemma beneath the altar of the Monastero - Santuario Di Santa Gemma



## **Holy Simplicity**

*“Let us go to Jesus. He is all alone and hardly anyone thinks of Him. Poor Jesus! See, oh Jesus, even at night, those hours, those hours! I sleep, but Jesus my heart does not sleep. It watches with You at all hours”.*

Although Gemma’s life was short, she wrote many hundreds of letters, prayers, kept a dairy and wrote a short and humble account of her life. Her dialogues, locutions and ecstasies were recorded and transcribed and it is with universal thanks to Fr. Germanus for collating and organising this great work of holiness in Lucca that gives us a detailed and complete record. It is through these inspirational works and words of Gemma that we may take a rare glimpse into the divine world of spirituality and prayer of a great twentieth century saint.

Despite having a good education and excelling in all studies, Gemma only ever wished for her one true vocation, to love Jesus with all her heart, soul and strength. It was with a remarkable simplicity and tranquillity that Gemma lived her faith. Her pure heart thought badly of no one. Her talking to others was minimal if not completely silent and her answers to those who desired a conversation would be a simple

“yes” or “no”. When writing in the stillness of her own room at a rough wooden bench table, her letters being unfussy went straight to the subject matter with no time being wasted on unnecessary sentiments and whether to Countesses, or Clerics in Rome everyone was addressed as a simple equal. Letters were composed in her immaculately neat copperplate handwriting on any bits of paper found lying around and viewed today the ink still remains so clear and bright. Gemma would spend many hours each day in front of the Blessed Sacrament Chapel of the small adjacent Church of “The Rose” always making sure each evening that she could apportion her time in Adoration and her family were used to her few departing words each day *“I am going to Jesus .... He is all alone”*. Her dialogues with Jesus were a natural easy experience like a father with his daughter as she would ask Him for example *“O Jesus what is it that makes you weep so? ..... let me weep instead”*. Gemma hardly slept at nights so much was the anticipation of rushing to Jesus in the first Mass of the day just after dawn and speaking of the Eucharist, the holy servant once said *“It is a question of uniting two extremes, God, who is everything, and the creature who is nothing; God who is Light, and the creature*

*who is darkness; God who is holiness, and the creature who is sin. It is a question of taking part in the Table of the Lord. There cannot be, then, enough preparation for it".* Only Holy Communion could provide Gemma with riches, for in receiving this Blessed Sacrament provided her with the only wealth she needed, the Bread of Heaven, as in all other secular matters she regarded herself as "poor". Literally poor yes, even the last two lire she owned had been snatched from her pocket by the family creditors. But her real poverty was that she desired and sought nothing with any earthly attachment other than her One True Love, Jesus.

### Humility and Mortification

From childhood Gemma followed a self imposed rule that *"she was nothing and that God was all"*. Although gifted in languages, art, music and poetry all of these talents were buried and she would only wish to be remembered as being a worthless, wicked, lowly, contemptible creature and a great sinner. Never was it known that she complained about anything; in sickness or torment every facet of her suffering was always accepted in a humble and contrite willingness. Gemma's response to Jesus would be *"Don't let me do anything that is above me – I*

*am not good at anything*" and all of her correspondence was signed in simple lower case *"pray for me poor gemma"*.

It has been revealed by her spiritual directors and confessors that although Gemma was continually owning up to and "confessing the most vile of sins" that in fact what she thought of as sins were actually heroic and virtuous deeds and it has been attested that she never committed any wilful or deliberate act in her lifetime. A further great affliction had to be born out when Fr. Germanus instructed Gemma under a vow of obedience to write out her own story from birth as "A General Confession" knowing this would cause her to reveal to the world all that had happened and (all that she had wished to remain hidden). A short and simplified "autobiography" was completed on the understanding that it would be called "The Notebook of My Sins".

Once, attending church Gemma allowed herself in curiosity to sneak a look at another girls beautiful dress. For this "shameful" act she became so annoyed with herself thinking that she had committed an act of atrocity and from that point onwards decided never to deliberately look at anyone again and to always keep her eyes lowered. To avoid any over

enjoyment of eating Gemma prayed that the sense of taste of food and drink be removed from her palate and this prayer was duly answered. A rigorous approach to penance was initiated and to mortify herself in atonement for the sins of others and herself she took to wearing a hair shirt as an undergarment and went to the extremes of using a cilice and girdle made of spikes and nails. When her confessor and Fr. Germanus discovered the latter and to what effect they had been used they were immediately confiscated from her.

*“Where are You, my God? I feel instantly restored as soon as I can raise my voice in praise of You; but since the joy is brief, my soul instantly falls back into its abyss ... Live in tranquillity and you shall see that darkness will pass and light will follow; be happy, hope in Jesus, only in Jesus” ....*

## Prayer Life, Angels and Demons

*“There remains only Jesus...Jesus alone! How good is His mysterious love that never tires. And in me He finds nothing but weakness, misery and sins, yet He loves me, loves me so much. He does not cease to let me hear His voice in my heart, to let me live in His dear presence; truly so great is the happiness that I experience, that at times I feel myself leaving this world. And, more and more I want to leave this earth and be taken to Heaven. Oh Paradise.....there where there is only one thing to do; to love”.*

St. Teresa of Avila (born Spain 1515) who lived a life of prayer and wrote many spiritual works said *“For though we are always in the presence of God those who practice prayer are present in a special way, for they see that God is watching them”* and this is a way that combines both aspects of meditative and contemplative prayer. Gemma did not use prayer books, cards or the usual repetitive *“Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory be”*; her prayers were very informal, personal, almost ordinary words in a spoken conversation to the Saviour. Her dialogues could take place day and night just as easily at home in her room or the kitchen as in church. To reach contemplative prayers’ highest degree meant immersing herself

in long exchanges with Jesus in a peace and tranquillity that cannot be explained and only a fraction of her own words can truly describe these supplications: *“Imagine that you see a light of immense splendour, that penetrates everything, surrounds everything, enlightens everything, and at the same time gives life and animation to all, so whatever exists has its being from this light and in it lives. Imagine a fiery furnace, greater than the universe that burns everything without consuming anything, that illuminates and strengthens and those that are penetrated by its flames are happiest and desire more ardently to be consumed. Then I see our souls in God”*

Following these communications with the Lord, Gemma was often seen to be in a state of ecstasy which is an extremely rare trance like rapture of delight associated with other great saints of the church such as St. Catherine of Siena and St. Pio of Pietrelcina and not even the pricking by needles or the touch of a naked flame on her arm caused her to flinch. The Giannini’s dining room housed a large wooden crucifix, the expressive face radiating a peace that transcended sorrow. The closed eyes of Jesus miraculously opened and Gemma was witnessed rising by levitation into the air. During these contemplative ecstasies, despite the

body remaining motionless, her heart would enlarge and palpitate to such a degree that its beating became audible to those in the room and any item or person touching the ecstatic would be caused to forcibly vibrate and in exaltation Gemma would often be observed “sweating blood” that seeped into her garments as Christ did in the Garden of Gethsemane. More unique was the mystical espousal between Christ and St. Gemma. “Come, bride of Christ, and receive the crown, which the lord has prepared for you for ever” (*Antiphon, Mass: common of virgins and Saint Gemma Galgani from the Roman Missal*) as Jesus appeared as a child in His Mothers arms and the Blessed Virgin removing a divine ring from Her Sons finger placed it on that of Gemma, the most holy and seraphic virgin of Lucca.

### Prayer Ministry

Gemma was always praying for the needs of others but was especially drawn to praying for the conversion and salvation of sinners and for the Holy Souls in Purgatory. *“I wish, oh Jesus, that my voice could reach to the ends of the world, to call all sinners and tell them to enter into Thy Heart .... Oh, if only all sinners would come to Thy Heart! ... Come! Come sinners, do*

*not be afraid! The sword of Justice cannot reach you Here!"* She would often know by either locution or divine inspiration the identity of sinners in Lucca and elsewhere even though she had never seen them before and if meeting anyone at home, even the slightest sin she could sense and upon so would caution them to return to the sacraments. During her ecstasies the actual sins of people would be revealed to the witnessing confessor and very shortly after the disclosed contrite sinner would be knocking at the church door seeking the sacrament of reconciliation. Even those who had spent a lifetime following corrupt or immoral practices were brought back to the faith through Gemma's prayers and intercession.

St. Gemma's zeal for the Holy Souls in Purgatory was extraordinary. She would regularly offer fervent prayers united with her own bodily sufferings for all of the souls in Purgatory and frequently offer prayers for a particular named soul. Jesus wished to bring all Holy Souls to Himself and would move His servant in different ways to atone for the sins of the souls. Gemma became a "Soul Victim" stating that "*The*

*(Guardian) Angel has told me that this evening Jesus will let me suffer a little more for a soul in Purgatory, that is for two hours beginning at nine o'clock"*

A Passionists Nun called Mary Teresa of the Infant Jesus had died in the Convent at Corneto. In death her soul full of sorrow appeared to Gemma imploring help as she was undergoing anguish in purgatory. Gemma prayed with tears and petitions to Jesus in the words *"Jesus, take Mary Teresa to paradise without delay. She is a soul most dear to You. Let me suffer much for her, I want her to be in heaven"*.

Gemma then affirms in her own diary that dressed in white, Mother Maria of the Infant Jesus visited her to thank her because eternal happiness was beckoning but asked for continued prayers and after sixteen days her soul was released. Gemma then describes how the Blessed Mother herself came to tell that the hour was approaching followed immediately by Mary Teresa coming towards her accompanied by her Guardian Angel and Jesus Himself. Smiling she came close to Gemma and *said "I am truly happy, and I go to enjoy my Jesus forever"*; and during the early hours of the morning well before dawn after a final

farewell how Mary Teresa with Jesus and her Guardian Angel flew to heaven.

### Guardian Angel

Within the heavenly realm of the choirs or ranks of holy angels are those appointed by God to be Guardian Angels assigned from a person's birth to death and this is clearly defined through history and Scripture as being a "truth of faith". They are spiritual creatures with intelligence and willpower and they are immortal. Throughout our lives they are charged with keeping a watchful and protecting eye and intercede for us "The truth is they are all spirits whose work is service, sent to help those who will be the heirs to salvation" (Hebrews 1:14), this sacred text describes the role of the Guardian Angel: to lead us, if we so wish it to eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

From early childhood our saint was blessed in being able to see her Guardian Angel and speak to him as any normal person. Gemma clearly understood her angel's role in the ministry of redemption of her soul hence her many hours of pleading to be able to join her Saviour in eternal peace at the earliest opportunity. Her angel would appear to be

with her constantly to enlighten and help with prayers and he would lead and guide as God's messenger. In a more amusing manner the Holy Angel would act as a postman as Gemma never having any money for stamps would entrust many letters to Jesus and place them in her own crib of the nativity. Miraculously these would without fail always arrive to the addressee (namely Fr. Germanus) in Rome and other destinations that he travelled to, the details and address of which Gemma had no knowledge of and in reverse she would always prophesise the arrival of any post addressed to her by always knowing in advance not only who the letters were from but at what exact time the arrival was to take place and by what mode of delivery.

When the need arose the Guardian Angel would act to admonish – *“Remember child that those who truly love Jesus speak little and endure a great deal. I command you, on behalf of Jesus, to always avoid giving your own opinion, unless it is asked for and always to prefer silence”* and similarly to console her in suffering with the words *“Jesus loves you immensely”* and then she would receive his blessing.

## The Adversary

Gemma being so close to the Lord and in the company and communion of saints was not immune to attacks of darkness, spiritual drought and the Devil and his demons where ever close to tempt, distract and harm her. When Gemma was entrusted to write her life story the Devil hated the idea that such a book should exist and set out to destroy it. When completed, the book's finished manuscript was hidden and locked away in a draw. The evil cackling demon came through the window to steal the book and whilst molesting Gemma with vileness, gnashing his teeth claimed triumphantly "War, War, I have your book". On hearing of the books' disappearance Fr. Germanus set out to exorcise the devil at the tomb of St. Gabriel Possenti and at that very moment even though four hundred miles away, the precious book was restored but in a sorry state. It was as though the book had been dragged to hell and back through acrid smoke and fire but although badly damaged the binding and text were still intact. The original book is today kept in Rome and is displayed in the Basilica of Saints John and Paul.

Satanic bodily assaults were frequent, violent and prolonged causing physical pain, wounds and dislocation of bones as Gemma was thrown around her room and once down the steep and narrow stone stairs that led to the ground floor of the house. In rages of fury the enemy tormented her by asking her to break her rosary and disrespect the Cross. With a barrage of insults he made repulsive threats and instilled into Gemma a deluge of impure suggestive and corrupt thoughts. So intense was the temptation of sensual impulses and passions that Gemma rushed to the Giannini's garden and in penance plunged herself down into the dark abyss of the brick well into the freezing mid winter icy water. When successfully praying for the conversion of sinners the Devil's eyes showed and glowed as darts of hot coals such was his vehement anger as this annoyed him the most. The demonic visions took the shape of vicious cats and dogs but also a more subtle form was used. It was not unusual for Satan to appear as a kindly looking angel trying to trick our servant with comforting words but when Gemma now familiar to this method of trickery uttered the phrase "*Blessed be God*" the evil one would quickly vanish. The Devil went so far as to

impersonate Monsignor Volpi hiding in the confessional and upon entering to make her confession Gemma was shocked by the foul language and this diabolical act of deceit. Despite persistent visits from malevolent fiends, after long battles they would all eventually retreat after succumbing to the "Holy name of Jesus".

*"In this world everything wearies me and weighs upon me; I desire nothing, only to love, to love, to love. I release as much love in my yearnings and prayers; this is how I spend my days."*

## **Last Days and Sanctification**

*“O Mother, pray for me. Tell Jesus that I will be good and obedient. But that I want to go soon to Paradise if He wills it. Bless me, I am poor Gemma”.*

In 1902 there was only one Passionists convent in Italy at Corneto (today called Tarquinia) but Jesus through Gemma intimated His desire for a new enclosure to be founded in Lucca. The Order knew this to be a large undertaking as land would need to be sought and bought plus the added cost of construction. Gemma and Cecilia went from door to door seeking donations and a promise of a vocation for Gemma was agreed if and when the religious house was completed. Many obstacles seemed to stand in the way and Jesus had spoken to His servant informing her that if work was not started within six months then “He would take her to Himself”. Gemma came to understand and accept that the monastery would not be completed in her own life time and calmly prepared for her final six months on this earth.

### **Final Illness**

By September 1902 Gemma had become gravely ill suffering high fevers and haemorrhaging from contracting pulmonary tuberculosis. The

parish priest administering early viaticum observed a transfigured girl rapt in rays of glowing light that reflecting off her blue shade walls must have appeared to him radiant as in the clouds. Four months passed and with a worsening condition that Gemma accepted as further expiation for the souls of sinners, it was decided by the medical authorities and Fr. Germanus that as a precaution against contagion within the household that she must be moved into isolation. Fortunately Cecilia Giannini discovered that a tiny adjacent apartment next door was available with its door facing her beloved church of the Santa Maria della Rosa and the bedroom window almost within touching distance of the present home.

On January 24<sup>th</sup> 1903 Gemma moved in and it is from here that she wrote a handful of letters as her final journey began. By March her frail body could only manage small amounts of liquids and bedridden her bodily systems slowly started to break down resulting in blindness. Gemma's last month would be her long dark night of the soul. Being in true darkness a hellish army of demons staged a final and unrelenting onslaught trying all means using harsh terrorising threats of violence followed by softer voices using arguments to convince that God had

abandoned her at the end by forcing her to dwell on all of the negative events in her short life. The sisters of St. Camillus de Lellis nursed her during these end days and Gemma found consolation by clutching her precious relic, that of a tooth of St. Gabriel Possenti that she kept in a tiny string pouch and when delirium prevented her dialogues to the Lord she would defiantly and heroically muster enough strength to utter "*Viva Gesu*" or "*My Jesus mercy*".

Despite the ravages of a trying sickness and emaciation at no point did her body emit any odour of decay and those around her testified that the saint only ever on her sickbed exuded a "most delicate and wonderful fragrance". Holy Week of Easter 1903: each day, Gemma was as though living out the final Passion of Christ Himself, waiting for the final expiration of the Lord. The whole Giannini family had gathered keeping a vigil around the bedside with the young daughter Euphemia clasping Gemma's pale hand to her own heart. As each hour passed the family kept a tabulated record of Gemma's condition. With death approaching, as an act of devotion our servant was able to pray to the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary by facing the wall and mentally make the "Via

Crucis" - Stations of the Cross and on that Holy Easter Saturday of April 11<sup>th</sup> at 1.45 pm Gemma managed her last words "*I surrender my poor soul to you ... Jesus*" and then as her pallor and bodily countenance miraculously returned to normal with a most beautiful smile, peacefully slipped away to join her beloved Mother and Saviour in the Eternal Kingdom.

Gemma's body was dressed neatly in a habit with the badge of the Passionists placed over her heart. When the death was publicly announced word spread fast and many came to pray and pay their respects at the bedside and to take away a small relic. Some had to be restrained from removing locks of the smooth brown hair. The mortal remains were placed in a simple wooden coffin and officiating from the Church of the Rose next door the funeral took place the following day on Easter Sunday in the cemetery of Lucca as would have been normal in 1903. Enclosed inside the casket sealed in a tube was a note from the parish priest which concluded with the words "*Live with the angels, Holy Soul and pray for us*".

In life Gemma had asked for her heart which burned and pulsed for the love of Jesus to be examined after death. In grief this had been forgotten and the body was exhumed for post mortem purposes at the end of April. In death there were no signs of decomposition but the most remarkable aspect was the greatly enlarged heart that had caused three ribs to forcibly bend out of shape to accommodate its size and incessant palpitations. Other phenomena revealed that the bright red blood had remained inside the organ as a fresh liquid without having clotted or congealed. (Note: in later years the still incorrupt heart was given to and remains today in Spain within Madrid's most popularly visited Church and Sanctuary of St. Gemma Galgani).

#### From Miracles to Canonisation

In October 1903 Pope Pius X authorised the foundation of the Passionists convent in the city of Lucca and in March 1905 when Fr. Germanus had raised and secured the finance, the first Passionists Sisters moved in to establish the large new landmark monastery with its distinctive great green dome opposite Lucca's eastern Porta Elisa where the Viale Cadorna meets the Via di Tiglio. A year later in 1906 Cecilia's daughter,

Gemma's best friend and (acquired sister) Euphemia Giannini joined the new community, taking the name Sister Gemma Magdalena.

By this time numerous graces and favours were being reported due to the intercession of this new "Spiritual Daughter of St. Paul of the Cross" and in response to requests for information Fr. Germanus collated Gemma's writings into volumes and wrote a best selling and complete account of her life which he published in 1908 following up a year later with the publication with the help of Mgr. Volpi of more of Gemma's correspondence and words transcribed by her family. This paved the way for the process for canonisation to be initiated and in 1910 Gemma was officially called for the first time "Servant of God".

Details of many miracles were being recorded, notably those cures of meningitis and cancers of the stomach and head by the touch of Gemma's relics and through prayer. At a hospital in Rome Marianna Angelini suffering from recurrent breast cancer applied a relic and picture of Gemma to her breast. Marianna's young daughter told her mother that a "beautiful young girl" had appeared to her assuring that Marianna would make a full recovery that was immediately confirmed

by the surgeon. The Servant of God was also credited with calming storms and aiding as in life the conversion of many sinners after they had been prayed for. In December 1909 Fr. Germanus died suddenly and whilst this temporarily caused a delay in the proceedings for sanctification it did allow the church to take time to study in detail Gemma's own writings and following their approval in 1918 the official cause for Beatification was introduced in 1920.

In 1923 the body of the saint in waiting was exhumed and moved in a large procession of translation from the local cemetery to be placed within a glass tomb that is displayed and forms the main altar in the Passionists Sanctuary that today is consecrated in her name. Within a side chapel adjacent to the altar the visitor and pilgrim may also visit the tombs of Fr. Germanus and Mgr. Volpi.

Following a declaration of Gemma's "Venerability" by Pope Pius XI in 1931 due to her "heroic virtues" the investigation of two miracles took place. The first miracle was that of a priest Fr. Ulisse Fabrizi of Caprarola who when asking for Gemma's help was immediately cured of a chronically incurable ulcer on his leg. The second miracle was the

sudden disappearance of almost twenty years of severe pain and arthritis that Maria Menicucci from Vitorchiano received via the intercession of the daughter of Lucca. After due and full consideration, beatification took place in Rome on May 14<sup>th</sup> 1933 by Pope Pius XI who affectionately named her “Gemma Christi, Gem of Christ”. Gemma’s sister Angelina and her elderly adopted father Matteo Giannini through tears of happiness were proudly in attendance in St. Peter’s Basilica.

In terms of years the process for canonisation was relatively short but as the rules were different from today, two more miracles were needed and in addition, sixty two witnesses including clerics, doctors and family members were called by the Sacred Congregation to offer their testimonies and conclusions to complete the course. The miracles selected from the many put forward were those pertaining to the Scarpelli’s of Lappano. Elisa Scarpelli aged 10 had cancer of the face, neck and jaw. Several physicians treated Elisa to no effect. On the day of Gemma’s beatification Elisa took the dressings off her face and applied a new type of medication that being a picture of the new “beata”. Full of faith and hope the image touched the ulcerating cancers with Elisa

praying the words "Gemma, look at me and have pity on me; please cure me" and the cancer and wounds instantly healed and disappeared.

The second miracle took place two years later in 1935 also in Lappano and furthermore another Scarpelli namely Natale (Noel). Natale was a hard working farmer whose leg after an accident became heavily infected. Within weeks the open sore became worse and the pain excruciating. What had appeared was a spreading ulcerous tumour and the poor Natale was confined to bed indefinitely. Natale's daughter knew Elisa who incredibly as it may seem was their neighbour. A relic of Blessed Gemma was placed inside the leg bandage with the sign of the cross having been made. The miracle took place overnight as on awaking the next morning the large open discharging wound cavity had healed and in its place fresh white skin. The medical profession at the time could only quote "This miracle is not only incomprehensible but it upsets all of the physiological and pathological laws of the medical field".

The two new miracles were accepted and arrangements for the canonisation were put in place for May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1940. Times were difficult as

war was raging throughout Europe; under a fascist Mussolini, Italy stood on the precipice and within a month would enter the hostile conflict. Amid the political crisis crowds gathered at St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, expectant and nervous of what lay ahead. Inside the great Basilica, Angelina Galgani was once again present with Euphemia Giannini (Sr. Gemma Magdalena). The slender bespectacled figure of Pope Pius XII addressed those gathered for this jubilant occasion. This was his first celebration of a canonisation. The Pontiff's decree likened Gemma's suffering to that of the apostle Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ, and the life I live is not my own; Christ is living in me". From the hushed silence, songbirds presented during the offertory of the Mass symbolising those souls in celestial paradise broke into a sweet spontaneous duet. Gemma Galgani a young humble Tuscan girl, model of Christian perfection and the first saint to have lived in modern times was elevated to the sainthood.

*"Be good and I promise you that I will remember you when I am finally with Jesus. I will not forget what you have done for me"*

## **The Footsteps and Legacy of St. Gemma Galgani**

**Universal Calendar Feast Day April 11th**

**Feast Day in the Passionists Calendar May 16th**

*“What is sweeter than to be filled with the thought of Jesus, and to kneel before that Divine Victim of love and sorrow—A Victim for my sins, my salvation and for the salvation of souls”*

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century pilgrim, tourist or visitor to the provincial city of Lucca will pleasantly find that little has changed since medieval times and what a delight it is to be able to wander around a walled city that is predominantly pedestrianised discovering for oneself St. Gemma Galgani’s enclosed world. For three seasons of the year the city exudes a generous heady fragrance of Jasmine which grows in abundance and even on a hot summers day the weary traveller can find shade in narrow lanes and passages or by heading for the cooler breezes that funnel down the wide cobbled Via Filungo.

The sacred buildings associated with St. Gemma are all still free to visit from the Basilica of St. Frediano where Gemma received her First Holy Communion, the Cathedral of San Michelle where her Sacrament of

Confirmation took place to the Duomo of San Martino where she first laid eyes on the Passionists. In the Piazza San Francesco lies the Franciscan Church where Gemma would frequently take refuge to hide from prying eyes during times when displaying her Wounds of the Passion.

The Giannini house in the Via Seminario where Gemma lived can be visited each day but it is worth checking ahead or when you pass by to see what the up to date times are. You must however always ring the doorbell and a nun will allow you entrance. This house remains exactly as it was in 1903 but is now connected to the building in the Via della Rosa where St. Gemma died. The many rooms are full of Gemma's sacramental objects, original writings, blood stained garments and pious family items plus locks of Gemma's hair and pieces of her twisted rib bone. The collection of buildings and garden are part of the Convent of the Sisters of St. Gemma, an Order founded with special permission from the Passionists by Euphemia Giannini (Sr. Gemma Magdalena) which today has further religious houses in Africa, ministering catechism and educating young people in poor and abandoned areas.

Also in existence are the Passionists Missionaries of St. Gemma who reside in Brazil. Sr. Gemma Magdalena in following her religious namesake's footsteps died a holy death in 1971 and on the path to canonisation was declared Venerable in 2008.

Opposite the front door of the convent entrance in the Via della Rosa is the small church of the Santa Maria della Rosa with its ornate interior, St Gemma's own little church of worship and confession and if the church doors are locked then once again the keys may be obtained from one of the sisters across the road.

The lofty Passionists Sanctuary of St. Gemma Galgani with its unmistakable green dome is opposite Lucca's eastern gate and just outside the city walls. The clean lines of its smooth white marble interior are comforting, quiet and peaceful. The focal point is without doubt the main altar under which lies the holy mortal remains in a sculptured tomb of St. Gemma's likeness encased in glass over which two masses every day (morning and evening) are celebrated. Attached to the large Sanctuary Church is a small museum and shop that contains many more relics including St. Gemma's tiny cloth shoes, original metal framed bed

and blood stained towels. If any pilgrim wishes to visit the old original Galgani house in the Via Santa Gemma Galgani where the Stigmata first appeared then enquires should be made with the curator of the museum and shop who if available can arrange to get the keys and act as a guide (which may involve an appointment being made) and involves walking back to Lucca's north eastern quarter.

In 1989 Pope John Paul II, now Saint John Paul II visited St. Gemma Galgani's Sanctuary Church and spoke of "*her littleness and hiddenness*". He affirmed that St. Gemma lived a work of the reconciliation of man with God by participating in Christ's Passion with special intensity by the total offering of herself and St. Gemma Galgani was asked to offer inspiration from heaven for a more greater need of the sisters (and ourselves in this modern world) to be an offering for the salvation of humanity.

## Prayers with St. Gemma Galgani

St. Gemma Galgani is the Patron Saint of Pharmacists, Students, those suffering from any spinal or back disorder and its associated pain, of those struggling with temptations and St. Gemma is also implored against tuberculosis and loss of parents.

### Prayers written by St. Gemma Galgani

*Lord, open Your heart to me, O Jesus, open to me Your sacramental heart, because I wish to place all my affection there. O Jesus how much I love You but why do you act with so much love when I offend You with my ungratefulness. This thought alone should be enough to turn me into a fire of burning love. Is it not an overwhelming love, to love Him who is not angry with one who has offended Him. O Jesus if I only considered more closely Your care for me. Pardon me O Jesus my carelessness, my great ignorance. My God, Jesus my Love, what would become of me if You don't draw me to You. Open Your heart to me, open to me Your sacramental heart as I open mine to You. Amen*

*Behold me at Your most holy feet, O dear Jesus, to manifest to you my gratitude for the continual favours which You have bestowed upon me, and still wish to*

*bestow upon me. As many times as I have invoked You, O Jesus, You have made me content; I have often had recourse to You and You have always consoled me. How shall I express myself to You, dear Jesus? I thank you! Yet one more grace I desire of you, O my God, if it would be pleasing to You (name your intention). If you were not omnipotent, I would not make this request. O Jesus, have pity on me. May your most holy will be done in all things. Amen.*

### **Prayer to St. Gemma**

*O Saint Gemma, how compassionate was your love for those in distress how great your zeal to help them. Help me also, in my present need (Name it ....) and obtain for me the favour I humbly implore if it be profitable for my soul. The numerous miracles and wonderful favours attributed to your intercession instil in me the confidence that you can help me. Pray to Jesus your Spouse, for me; show Him the Stigmata which His love has given you. Remind Him of the blood which flowed from these same wounds, the excruciating pain which you have suffered, the tears which you have shed for the salvation of souls. Place all this as your precious treasure in a chalice of love and Jesus will hear you. Amen*

*Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be*

Centenary Prayer (1903 – 2003) of St. Gemma

by Saint John Paul II

*O Father, we ask you to establish Your dwelling in those who love you with a heart pure and simple, that through the example and the intercession of St Gemma, we may live the pure Gospel and the mystery of a love crucified, to be the living image of your Son. He who lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever.*

*Amen*

*St. Gemma Galgani Pray for us*

## **Selected Bibliography, Further Reading and Information**

The Autobiography of St. Gemma Galgani by Gemma Galgani (1901)

[www.passionists-uk.org](http://www.passionists-uk.org) (Official UK Passionists website)

[www.passiochristi.org](http://www.passiochristi.org) (Official Passionists website)

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## Where Art & Books Collide

### About the Writer - John Paul Kirkham

John Paul Kirkham is a poet, photographer and writer living in the city of Liverpool and is the author of many books including the well known anthology of poetry "In Violet" and is the official biographer of Saint Clare of Assisi and Saint Gemma Galgani. John Paul studied in the 1970's at the John Laird School of Art in Merseyside leading to a long career as a photographer firstly in forensics (yes the scary stuff of "Silent Witness") then general press, running a studio, advertising, documentary film making and managing Britains largest private photographic and film archive. John Paul notably spent twelve years on Kensington Palace's royal photographic rota with HRH Diana - Princess of Wales and over the years has featured on television, radio and as a real life character in Blake Morrisons book of stories "Too True"

If you would like to know more and to access the poetry, photographs and books, please visit [www.johnpaulkirkham.simplesite.com](http://www.johnpaulkirkham.simplesite.com)

## About the Front Cover Artist - Jan Kalinski

The celebrated artist Jan Kalinski is based in the south of England among Kent's leafy lanes. Jan spent many years teaching drawing and painting in Western Canada and works in oils, acrylics and digital mediums. In 1992 Jan was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) resulting in permanent numbness of his fingers. He can no longer hold a fine pencil or write his own name but will not let go of a paintbrush and his work today continues to be stunning as ever. Find him at [www.jankalinski.art](http://www.jankalinski.art)

