

# LENA AND THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

by Rev. Clarence Kelly

In the 19th century there was a priest in the diocese of Philadelphia by the name of Father John P. Dunn. Father Dunn often told the story of Lena and the Blessed Sacrament. He told it with authority because it was a true story in which he himself was directly involved.

One day, when he was still a young priest, he was called to the home of an Episcopalian minister. This was quite unusual for at least two reasons. Not only was it the home of a Protestant minister, but this particular Protestant minister was known as a bitter anti-Catholic. He was hostile to everything tinged with what he would call "Romanism." And so, Father Dunn was very surprised to get the summons. "It must be," he presumed, "that there is a Catholic servant who is dying and whose desire for the sacraments has triumphed over the bigotry of the minister."

The priest went over to the Church to get the Blessed Sacrament to take to the dying servant. This done, he set out quietly, reverently and speedily on his mission of mercy. Off he went to the home of the Protestant minister.

He was greeted at the door and was led into an elegant room. Clearly this was not the room of a servant. It was, much to his surprise and astonishment, the room of the minister's only child, a girl of nine who was now close to death. Although so ill, she was a pretty little child, with a delightful personality and intelligent beyond her years - the idol of the household.

For the first four years of her life she enjoyed excellent health. Her parents also cared for her with great solicitude. But from the age of four she began to change. She carried a great love and a secret sorrow - which now had brought her close to death.

The doctors did all they could. There

was nothing left for them to do. With all their knowledge, they were at a loss to determine the nature of the child's illness. They had not the slightest clue what was wrong with her. And yet there she was - lying in bed hardly able to raise her little head. She was fading away before their very eyes with no apparent cause.

While the doctors wondered and friends and relatives wept for grief, the minister and his wife knew - at least they thought they knew - what was really wrong with their precious little girl and what had brought her to this state. But they spoke not a word of it to the doctor. Until one day they made him suspicious.

On that day Lena's mother was overwhelmed with grief and made a reference to those "popish servant girls." She said this in connection with her daughter's present state. The doctor quite naturally asked her what she meant. And when she hesitated to tell him he insisted on an explanation. He had a right to know, he said, if he was expected to help the little girl! And so, although reluctant, she finally told him the story.

Once they had an excellent servant girl, she said, a Catholic who was most agreeable in spite of her "popish" background. She was almost like a member of the family. Little did they know, the mother continued, that she was a viper in their midst.

Though born and baptized a Catholic, the young servant did not practice her faith. She had no Catholic books in her possession. She possessed no medals or pictures. She was actually quite indifferent to her Catholic background. She never went to Mass and had nothing to do with all those "popish superstitions" - as the minister's wife referred to Catholic practices. In fact this servant girl even attended the religious instructions of their daughter which

the minister hoped would eventually cause her to embrace the Protestant religion.

One afternoon the servant girl took little Lena for a walk. There was really nothing unusual about that. She had done it many times before. It was a part of her usual routine. This one particular day they came across a Catholic Church. And as they did, something strange happened. For the first time in years the fallen away Catholic servant girl had an inclination to go in. It just so happened that Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was scheduled that afternoon. Lena and the servant took their places and watched. The little girl was enthralled with what unfolded before her eyes: the sounds, the sights, and the smell - the beautiful hymns, the vestments and altar, the sweet scent of incense, the chant and ringing of the bells and the golden monstrance wherein rested the Sacred Host which was nothing less than the Body and the Blood, the Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ.

From that day on little Lena was never the same. That was the beginning of the fatal "misery" which was now consuming her. Though Lena was but a child of four, she was so impressed with the ceremonies of Benediction that she wanted to go again but her anti-Catholic parents would not allow it.

From a pious and docile little Protestant, she turned into a stubborn little Catholic when it came to matters of religion. She had no more interest in her Protestant prayers and her Protestant Bible lessons. She had none of her former attention and thoughtful reverence at the Protestant services.

The servant girl was, of course, discharged and her diabolical influence was countered by surrounding little Lena with all good Protestant influences. But nothing worked. The girl longed with a great desire for the "popish" ceremony of Benediction. It seemed a terrible infatuation and even a diabolical possession, her parents thought, that was now destroying the life of their precious little girl.

When the doctor heard the story, he immediately demanded that a Catholic priest

be called. Though he was a Protestant, he supposed that a priest could go through some ceremony that would deliver the girl from her condition. He knew Father Dunn, having met him on a number of occasions, and recommended calling him. The mother was greatly opposed to such a thing but she finally yielded to the demands of the doctor, hoping against hope, that this particular "papist" clergyman would help the little girl. After all, the doctor did assure her that Father Dunn was really a decent person. It wasn't that she believed him - but what was she to do?

And so there was Father Dunn in the room of their little Lena. The doctor stood guard by the open door - looking on as Father Dunn approached the bed of the girl.

As Father Dunn moved towards the bed, Lena looked up. She seemed to know instantly that he was a Catholic priest. Immediately she sat up in bed to the amazement of the doctor. She clasped her hands before her and with great eagerness she cried out to the amazement of Father Dunn: "You have brought my Lord. I wouldn't go without Him."

Seeing that she was so excited, Father Dunn sought to calm the little girl. He spoke to her in a somewhat subdued manner because he carried at his breast the Blessed Sacrament. He was now standing beside the bed and to his amazement little Lena reverently reached her frail hand towards him and laid it upon his breast - where the Sacred Host rested in the pyx. (A pyx is a little golden case in which a priest carries the Blessed Sacrament to the sick. It is placed inside another case, usually of leather which is lined with precious silk.)

Lena wanted to become a Catholic and she wanted to receive Holy Communion. When Father Dunn questioned her, he discovered that this little Protestant girl had an astounding knowledge of the teaching of the Church about the Holy Eucharist. But he faced a dilemma. If he waited to receive her into the Church, she might die. If he received her too hastily, that could be rushing what is a very serious matter.

As Father Dunn pondered the ques-

tion, the doctor, standing by the door, sensed his indecision and seemingly without the slightest hesitation shouted out to the priest urging him to give her Holy Communion. "Her life is at stake," he said.

Father made his decision. He would receive her into the Church, prepare her and give her Holy Communion right then and there. He would not leave until this was done. And so little Lena received the Blessed Sacrament,

making her first Holy Communion.

The priest placed the Sacred Host on her tongue. She closed her mouth and when she did, she smiled a gentle smile. She sank back onto her pillow. And as Father Dunn raised his hand to pronounce the blessing which comes at the end of the rite for the distribution of Holy Communion to the sick, she died - her angelic soul flying into the arms of God. True to her words: "I wouldn't go without Him."

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