

The Life of St Odilia

written in Latin by a monk in the late 9th century,
translated into English by another monk in the early 21st century

In the Name of Christ Begins

The Life of Saint Odilia, Virgin

Chapter 1

In the reign of Emperor Childeric, there lived a famous duke called Adalric, also Etih, descended from a very noble family in the land of the Gauls. His father Liutheric had received the honour of serving at the emperor's residence as mayor of the palace. The son was a righteous man and, although a layman, wanted to lead a religious life. Inspired by the grace of God he began to think about preparing a suitable place for serving God, and shared this secret of his heart with his most loyal followers. They already suspected his intentions and wanted to help him fulfill them, so they kept his secret and disclosed to him a perfect spot that would fulfill his desire. They told him that his own hunters had found a place in the high mountains which because of its elevated fortification was called Hoenburc – high castle. They thought it fit for fulfilling his wish and hoped it would please His Venerable Paternity. It was said to have been formerly constructed as a defensive fortress against impending wars at the time of King Marcellian. The famous man of God



agreed to their proposal and quickly went to this place, investigating it diligently. He began to give God thanks that He had deigned to make known to him such a dwelling place which was so suitable and fitting for the fulfilment of his desire. He immediately gave orders to build there a church and other buildings fitting for those who serve Christ.

Chapter 2

A venerable spouse joined his bedchamber, Berchtswind, born from very noble ancestors. We have learned from many that she was distinguished by kinship with St. Leodegar. Although she was bound by the laws of marriage, she dedicated herself to alms and the other works of justice,

listened gladly to Holy Scripture and tried to give God unblemished service, remembering the word of the Apostle: “Let those who have wives live as though they had none”, and so on. Through God’s decree it so happened that from them was born a daughter, blind from birth. The father was alarmed when he heard that she was born blind, for he feared that this was happening to him because of some offense of his. He wondered whether he should have her killed and said to his wife: “I suspect that I have somehow enraged God because this has happened to me, something which never happened to anyone in my lineage.” And so he ordered that the child be killed. The mother of the daughter replied: “My lord, do not be sad. I recognize that the judgment of God is made manifest, for Christ himself responded to His disciples when they asked Him about the man who was born blind: ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him.’”



However, he did not want to be consoled by these words and in his heart he resented more and more that this girl was alive. He told his wife again that it shamed him greatly that his daughter could not see. And he ordered her to commission one of the servants to either kill this girl or to take her to a place where she would never be known.

Chapter 3

The mother was crushed with anxiety and did not immediately follow the order of her husband. Her mind went back and forth, not knowing what to do with her daughter. She came to the conclusion that it would be better to send her abroad or to some hiding place rather than to have her purposely killed. She prayed mightily to the Lord that He give her insight through the grace of His Holy Spirit who is known to be the consoler of the distressed. Thereupon, inspired by God’s grace she began to remember a certain woman whom she had brought up in her household. She had always been very loyal to her, but at one time she was sent away because of some misdeed. She had meanwhile married and together with her husband had her own family. When the lady heard that she already had a son, and remembering their former closeness, she sent a messenger asking her to come with great speed. When the order of her lady reached the woman, she gladly obeyed the summons and quickly came. When they met, the lady shared with great sadness what her husband had ordained for the daughter. When the servant heard how her lady was saddened, she felt great sympathy for her pain and said: My lady, who are dear to God, do not suffer grief because of your daughter, for the Lord who created her according to His will, also has the power to restore in her what is imperfect. If you so wish, give her to me to nurse her. If God allows, it shall be my part to raise her up to full adulthood. The venerable lady was consoled, took the girl and handed her over to the handmaid, saying: I give her to you to feed and entrust her to my Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter 4

The woman happily took the girl, returned to her house and fed her for almost a year, until the neighbours began to talk about whose daughter this might be whom she was feeding so respectfully. Upon hearing these words, the wet nurse began to fear that what she had tried to do in se-



cret might become public. She sent a message to her lady telling her what the neighbours were saying. The lady replied that she should secretly hurry to another place called Palma and hide there together with the girl. She assured her that she had a friend in this place who would provide all that she needed. Happily following these instructions, she arrived at the indicated place and raised the girl in that monastery. One day, God in a vision gave orders to a certain bishop Erhard from the land of the Bavarians: "Go to a certain monastery which is called Palma. There you will find a girl which has been blind since birth; take her and baptize her in the name of the Threefold Majesty, and give her the name Odilia, and after baptism she will see." He joyfully fulfilled the mandate and rushed to the aforementioned place where he found everything to be as it had been shown to him. Thereupon he took the girl and immersed her in the consecrated font according to the mandate he had been given. When he raised her from the sacred font and anointed her eyes

with chrism, the wraps of the eyes were loosened and she brightly looked into the bishop's face. The holy servant of God, filled with great joy, gave God thanks with worthy praise and revealed to the community that he had been shown all this in a vision. He admonished and encouraged the nuns that they should take diligent care of that virgin which had been consecrated to Christ. Then he gave the kiss of peace to his little daughter and said: "In the eternal kingdom, if God's mercy allows, we may look at each other's face again." And as everything had been brought to a good end, he returned to his own country.

Chapter 5

The nuns raised the beloved virgin of Christ and obliged her to meditate upon the Scriptures. The holy virgin now had her eyesight and so endeavoured to develop skill in sacred reading, be watchful in prayer, persistent in abstinence and as generous as possible in giving alms. From the heights of her lofty mind she looked down upon worldly pomp as nothing; and as she was not shackled by all those things which might have seduced her mind with illicit desires, she more freely served only that One into Whose army she had surrendered herself.

Chapter 6

The heavens revealed to the father, however, that his daughter whom he had ordered to be killed, had survived, and that when a bishop had washed her in the sacred font her eyesight had been restored. The bishop did not know that all these things had been revealed to the father. As he returned to his country, he sent a message to the duke. He told him all that had happened and implored him to hasten with the help of God to end the conflict which the devil had brought about between him and his daughter and to return to unity.

Chapter 7

The outstanding Odilia lived in the monastery and made an effort to render unto God the customary service. It so happened that some religious women, driven by the instigator of all evil, began to hate her because bad people always envy the deeds of the good. They inflicted many adversities on her, which Odilia ignored, however. She freely accepted all reproaches for the love of God and grew daily in the Lord's service.

She had a handsome brother who had been very well educated in her father's house and whom the father dearly loved. Odilia had never spoken to him nor seen him. She wrote a letter to her brother, wrapped it in a scarlet bundle and sent it to him through a traveller. In it she implored her brother to remember her for the love of God Who orders us to love not only our neighbours and friends but even our enemies. The brother received the letter which his beloved sister had sent him and read it attentively. Then he said to his father: "My dear lord, grant an ear to the request of your son who is imploring your mercy." The father replied: "If you ask something inappropriate then it would not be right to grant you permission." The son replied: "It could be appropriate, if it please your Paternity, for I ask nothing but that you call back your daughter who is now living among faraway people and is deprived of the consolation of family, and to let her come into your presence." But the father commanded him to stop talking about this matter. This good-hearted young man however felt the pain of his sister, and without knowledge of his father sent a cart and all else which is necessary for the journey and had her come back to her home.

Chapter 8

Now one day, as the duke sat with his son and some of his men on a prominent part of that fortress which is called Hohunburc, it so happened that the bride of Christ Odilia arrived, sitting in a cart as was the customary way to travel in those days, accompanied by a big crowd, just as her brother had arranged. The duke lifted his gaze and saw the multitude. Startled he asked what that was. The youth replied that it was his daughter Odilia. The duke asked: "Who was so stupid and reckless as to dare call her back without my order?" The boy, realizing that he could not hide this, told his father: "I, your servant, for it would have been our shame if she had remained in such poverty. I felt great pity for her affliction and called her back. My father, be lenient for I know I have acted very stupidly, bringing her back without your command." But that duke, oh so overcome with terrible fury, hit the boy with the staff in his hand harder than he intended. Badly wounded by the blow, the young man weakened and died. The father, realizing the brutality of his own crime, did penance through mourning and abstinence. He sighed continually and said: "Woe to miserable me! By killing my son, I have incurred the great wrath of the Supreme Judge!" And from that day until his death, he stayed in the monastery, trying to placate God with worthy fruits of penance. He went often to the churches of saints where, with contrite spirit and an exhausted body, he asked with sincerity for their intercession.



Chapter 9

In the end, through the disposition of God's mercy, he remembered the rejection of his daughter and gave order to have her summoned. When she came he wanted to act somewhat more mildly towards her, so gave her to a nun who was from Britain. He established that Odilia be given the daily upkeep of one maidservant. She accepted this with thanksgiving and remained in the monastery for a long time, having nothing more than what one of the maids usually has.

Chapter 10

Meanwhile, her wet nurse left this world. Odilia remembered how she used to feed her diligently. She had the ground dug up for the burial and saw to it herself that the body be entrusted to the earth. After almost 80 years the tomb where the nurse had been buried was dug up for the burial of another body. The whole body had decomposed and turned into dust except for the right breast, which was found uncorrupted and whole, as if it had been cut off from a body just now. This is believed to have happened as approbation of the nurturing of the holy virgin, for the wise wet nurse, apprehending something heavenly in her, had only ever suckled her with her right breast, and had kept her wrapped in a linen cloth during the entire breast-feeding period.



Chapter 11



The holy virgin lived in the monastery for a long time, contented with her ration and not having anything else, for her father did not call her and she did not presume to approach him without being summoned. But as the Divine Mercy had decreed that her light should be put on a stand that those who enter may see the light, it so happened that one day, as she was carrying a vessel of flour under her coat, she came across her father inside the monastery precinct. Although he was still of a stiff disposition, through divine inspiration he addressed her kindly: “My dearest daughter, where are you coming from, and where do you want to go, and what are you carrying? She stopped and answered: I am carry-

ing a bit of flour, my lord, so that I can prepare some food to strengthen the poor. To which he replied: “Don’t be sad because up to now you led a life of scarcity. With God’s help you will very soon rise above it.” And on that very day he gave the aforesaid monastery with all that was attached to it into her hand, beseeching her that she and her community should always remember him and insistently intercede with God for his misdeed. He did not live much longer: soon his last day dawned.



Chapter 12

Odilia understood through the opinions of many and through divine revelation that her father was in the place of punishment because of the sins for which he had been unable to make the appropriate penance because death had forestalled him. Thus, the death of her father filled her with



immense grief and she endeavoured through vigils, fasting and prayers, to obtain mercy from the Lord, remembering that he had told his disciples:

“Amen, I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” The Divine Mercy, however, wanted to console her in so much grief. Thus, as she was praying at a hidden site on that mountain upon which the monastery was built, so that she could more ardently and more freely castigate herself for the absolution of her father, the heavens opened suddenly and a divine light came down on her as she lay prostrate in prayer. The cell seemed to radiate and a voice told her

this: “Odilia, beloved of God, curb the anxiety of your affliction, for you have obtained from the Lord the remission of the sins of your father. Lo, he has been freed from hell (*ab inferno*) and angels are taking him to join the choir of patriarchs.” When she heard this she said: “I give you thanks, Lord, for you have graciously listened to my unworthiness, not because of my merits but out of your goodness.”

Chapter 13

Odilia had almost 130 nuns under her care and direction. The holy mother undertook to lead them according to a twofold doctrine: what she taught by words she confirmed by example. Every day she practiced holy obedience, bearing in mind the apostolic admonition: “Lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified”. St Odilia was constant in prayer, eager for spiritual reading, moderate in speech and singular in her abstinences. Except on solemnities, she ate no other food than barley bread and vegetables. In bed she covered herself with a bear skin putting a stone under her head as a pillow. She did this not seeking human praise but for the sake of her Redeemer. In this way she made many godly sacrifices in secret, remembering that He had said: “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”, and other similar things.

Chapter 14

The monastery which the venerable abbess governed was built, as we have mentioned already, on a high mountain, and not only the infirm but even those with full use of their body found it hard to climb up. It pained the holy servant of God that because of this difficulty people rarely came to her monastery, for she excelled in hospitality. She called the whole community which she governed together, asking for their advice: "You see, beloved sisters, that the harshness of the road makes the ascent very hard for pilgrims and weak people. That is why few come to us. I would like to order, if it pleases your holinesses, to build a hostel on the lower slope of this mountain for the reception of Christians." All replied that this was an excellent idea. Having received their blessing, she started with building a church in that place, had it dedicated to St Martin and henceforth received the poor. The sisters liked that residence because it was a delightful place and overflowing with water. They requested that a monastery be built there, for the upper monastery had great shortage of water. Odilia agreed to this proposal and built a monastery in that place which remains there to this day.



Chapter 15

While she was busy with this work, a certain man came to her who carried three lime tree seedlings. He said to her: "My lady, accept these little seedlings and plant them, so that later they will be a memorial to you." She accepted them and ordered three holes to be dug. Meanwhile, one of the sisters came to her and said: "Do not plant these seedlings, my lady, for from this tree bad worms are often born." Odilia replied: "Do not worry, for nothing bad will ever come from these trees." And she took one in her hand and said: "I plant thee in the name of the Father." Then she took the second one and said: "And thee in the name of the Son", and the third one, saying: "And thee in the name of the Holy Spirit", thus completing the mystery of the Trinity. Up to this day their shade can be seen to extend over a large area and during the summer heat provides great coolness for the nuns.



Chapter 16

It was her custom to receive pilgrim women from Ireland and Britain into the monastic life, and she also joyfully received religious men who arrived from various provinces, and from among them she had some priests ordained for herself. She completed both monasteries and placed nuns in them. After this she called all sisters together and asked them to indicate whether they

would rather lead a canonical or a regular life. They all replied unanimously that they wanted to have a regular observance. Odilia replied with humility and gentleness: "I know, beloved sisters and mothers, that you are very keen to bear all hardship for Christ's name. But I fear that if we were to opt for the regular life, we would incur curses from our successors, for this place is, as you know, quite unsuitable and burdensome for regular life; even water can only be painstakingly obtained. Wherefore it seems to be better, if your motherliness agrees, that you shall stay in the canonical habit." Thereupon, all chose according to her words the canonical rule in which those who live in these monasteries persevere until today, following the norms of their predecessors. When they had indeed accepted the canonical rule, Odilia said: "I thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, who pulled me unworthy one out of blindness through holy baptism, not because of my merits but because of your unspeakable clemency. To Thee, Lord, I pray that this family of yours over which you have placed me shall always be kept under your protection and that all cupidity of carnal desires be kept away from them. May they always render you unblemished service with total dedication of spirit."

Chapter 17

Through the ascent unto holy virtue she grew upward like a healthy fir tree. Although she endeavoured to call upon the communion of all the saints



to help her, she addressed herself more frequently to the relics of St John the Baptist, because in baptism she had obtained her sight. Because of this she planned to build a church in his honour. As she wanted to know through a revelation which place he had destined for the construction of his church, she got up before the night prayers and went to a hidden place which she had chosen for prayer, and there prostrated herself on a big rock which until this day shows off a wooden cross of no small size in her honour. While she poured herself out in overflowing prayer, Saint John the Baptist is said to have appeared to her, surrounded by bright light and dressed as he was when he baptized the Saviour in the river Jordan. One of the nuns, however, whose job it was to announce the time for the divine office, had gone outside in order to tell from looking at the stars if the time for ringing the night signal had come. When she saw this brightness, she wanted to know what was going on and tiptoed closer. When she had arrived she was terrified by this extraordinary splendour and immediately returned to her duty. She could only see the holy virgin surrounded by great brightness, but Saint John she did not see. At that time, Saint John revealed to the chosen virgin of God both the place where he wanted the church to be built, and also how long and wide it had to be. When the night prayer was over, Odilia right away called that nun who had been present during the vision and directed her not to share this vision with anybody before Odilia's death. Then she

disclosed to her what had remained hidden: “The bright light which you saw did not occur because of me, but because of Saint John who talked to me and gave the instruction to build a church for him.” She was filled with great joy and when daylight came, she undertook immediately the godly work that had been shown to her.



Chapter 18

During this undertaking a miracle occurred which I think should not be passed over in silence. The oxen which were pulling a cart filled



with stones for the construction of the church fell from the peak of the mountain to the ground which was 70 feet or more below. The men rushed down the slope, wanting to cut the bulls' throats with their swords if they still had any life in them so that they could at least eat their meat. Because of the intercessions and merits of the saintly Baptist, however, they found them and the loaded cart undamaged. They made the oxen pull the cart back up to the aforementioned work on a narrow path hardly wide enough for a horse. When the church was completed, Odilia had a dormitory and some workshops constructed next to it, and there led a hidden life together with a few others.

Chapter 19

She also had a brother, Adalbert by name, who had three daughters. One was called Eugenia, another Atala, and the third Gundlinda. These, listening to the teaching of the holy virgin, were enflamed with love for God and so considered abandoning the world and surrendering themselves to the discipleship of their aunt. Taught by her example, they wanted to learn perfectly how to tame all fleshly desires in themselves and to render the Lord Jesus Christ worthy service so that they would merit the imperishable reward of eternal life together with her. When Odilia heard about this wish, she gladly received them, educated them diligently and once they were educated gave them into the Lord's service.

Chapter 20

It later happened that one of the servants of the monastery killed her brother. She began to be greatly saddened by this death, and the whole community with her. That's why they asked the Lord that he should revenge her on him who had aggrieved her so much. They said that it would be better if he were punished in this present time rather than having to undergo eternal punishment in future. Their prayers were answered, as his progeny proved, for no descendant of his was ever born without some defect.

Chapter 21

The custom in this monastery was that one after another they should have individual days of fasting and singing psalms. One day it so happened that the day of fasting came for Odilia. While she was standing in prayer to finish the psalter, one of the attendants came to her and said: “My lady, I do not wish to conceal from Your Nobility that we are at an end when it comes to serving wine to our sisters, for we have nothing beyond today's measure. It is your responsibility to foresee what to do.” She said: “Don't be sad, daughter, and have faith; for the One who fed thousands of men with five breads and two fish also has the power to multiply this small measure which he has

graciously preserved, if it pleases His will. Go now and be attentive to the responsibility that has been entrusted to you and do not forget what he has said: 'But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,' and so on." The attendant asked for the blessing and returned to her duties. At the time when according to custom wine should be given to the sisters, she went to the wine barrel in which a small measure remained, something which in the language of the Gauls is called *wogin*, and found it full. She returned to her lady right away and told her what had happened. Odilia summoned the sisters and said: "Give thanks to the Lord Jesus Christ who has not abandoned those who hope in him and in his goodness has graciously multiplied for us the quantity of wine, so that we may render due service unto him without murmuring." And she delighted them with this wine for the love of God.

Chapter 22

The holy virgin castigated her flesh more and more. She proceeded from virtue to virtue and advanced daily in gathering holy virtues. God had already decreed that she should rest from the labour of this struggle and receive the blessed reward which she had merited in this lifetime with such fervour. She knew that the dissolution of her body was imminent and went to the church of Saint John the Baptist. She summoned all the sisters and admonished them that they should always love the Lord and strive to obey his commands in everything. She also implored their Holinesses, that they should with all their strength call upon the Lord for herself, her father and her other relatives.



Having said this, she ordered them to go to the oratory of Saint Mary and to celebrate the psalmody there. She alone remained in that place. While they were fulfilling her command and singing the psalms, this holy soul was separated from the flesh. A great aroma of wonderful fragrance emanated from there, as if the entire house were filled with perfume. When the sisters came back after their prayer, they found their spiritual mother already dead and were saddened with great grief that they had not been worthy to be present when such a holy soul departed; and that their beloved mother had given up the ghost before receiving the last communion. As they were very anxious, they

all threw themselves to the ground in prayer, shed tears of deep affection and asked the Lord that He should command the holy angels who were escorting her soul to bring her back to her body. And in a wonderful way, as they were praying with all their might, the soul suddenly returned to the body. The holy servant of God sat up and spoke to them: “O dearest mothers and sisters, why are you imposing such restlessness on me, asking the Lord that He order a soul which has shed the weight of corruption to revisit again that which it had already given up? For I, through



the grace of God, had been joined in fellowship with the virgin Lucy and was in so much joy that the tongue is not enough to express it, nor the ear to hear, nor the eye to see.” But they argued that they had done this to avoid the accusation of negligence if she were to die without the body of the Lord. She ordered that the chalice in which the Lord’s body and blood are kept be brought to her, and took it with her own hands. Having taken holy communion, she gave up her soul while all were looking on. That very chalice has remained in this monastery up to now as a memorial of this venerable fact.

Chapter 23

The nuns buried the sacred body with great honour in that very church on the right side in front of the altar of Saint John the Baptist. The fragrance of wonderful odour which had spread there earlier, remained until the eighth day. In this place, a number of miracles were later recorded which the Divine Mercy granted through the intervention of the merits of the holy virgin of God. One should not marvel that she had said that she was united with St Lucy, the martyr of Christ: for although her life was not ended through martyrdom imposed by others, yet she attempted to tame her flesh in so many tough and arduous ways and to wear it down, that she would certainly not have refused to submit her neck to the blade, were it not for the absence of any persecutor’s ferocity. Saint Odilia departed and, if I may say so, traded her life for a better one on the ides of December (December 13), under the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be praise, honour and power for all ages. Amen.



