

SISTER BLANDINE MERTEN

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THIS little book¹ makes known for the first time to English readers the holy and hidden life of a German Ursuline nun who died in the odour of sanctity in 1918, at the age of thirty-five.

The story is a beautifully simple one. Sister Blandine was born in the Saar district in 1883, the daughter of a farmer. She became a qualified teacher and taught in a little village school, until at the age of twenty-five she entered the Ursuline Novitiate at Calvarienberg near Ahrweiler in the Rhineland. In 1911, after taking her first vows, she was sent to Saarbrücken to resume teaching. Within a few weeks, however, illness caused her to be moved to lighter work at the convent at Trier. Here she remained, occupied in the school, until her last illness confined her to her room in 1916. She was bedridden for eighteen months, and died on May 18th, 1918. She made her final vows in 1913, but never lived to achieve the five years' seniority which gives to an Ursuline the title of 'Mother'. Her last two working years, and her months in the infirmary, were passed amid the stresses of war-time and the horrors of constant bombing: during the night before her death (as on many nights before) she had besought the infirmarian to go to the shelter and leave her when the air-raids began. Once the convent was hit—it was completely destroyed in 1944—but Sister Blandine never came to any harm and died peacefully when the time came.

It was an uneventful life, by the standards of the world, but it was a life of unswerving pursuit of holiness and devotion to the Will of God. During her lifetime her companions all loved her, and one of her superiors once referred to her as 'a perfect nun' (p. 86). Since her death, she has been more than once compared to St Teresa of Lisieux, and indeed her sanctity has a similar hidden quality. This life, written by an Ursuline, has been compiled from personal reminiscences, statements of many other nuns, and particularly from the extensive spiritual notes of Sister Blandine herself. There is also valuable evidence of her holiness of life already as a young teacher before entering the cloister. Her motto was *Alles ist mir Himmel*, literally 'Everything is heaven to me', but perhaps more freely rendered 'I try to see heaven in everything around me', and the direction of her spirituality was the simple one of complete conformity to the Will of God.

The book contains statements by the late Dr Bares, at one time her spiritual director and subsequently Bishop of Berlin, witnessing to his

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opinion of her sanctity and particularly to her intercession which he frequently sought after her death, and Fr A. Merk, S.J., speaks in similar terms in his introduction to the book. A series of documents gives details of cures obtained after invocation of Sister Blandine.

The cause for the beatification of Sister Blandine was opened in 1949, and the third edition of her life (of which this is a translation) was produced in that year. Although the translator dates her note from London, the style of English is not satisfactory, and a certain unctiousness, suitable enough, perhaps, in German, could well have been toned down. The treatment of proper names in translation is always difficult, but 'Miss Merten' does look odd, especially when as a child she is called 'Riechen' (short for Mariechen); and 'P. August Merk' (p. 11), 'the Rev. Dean Lehnen' (p. 40), 'Father Merk' (p. 72), 'the Rev. Prof. Dr Bares' (p. 91), 'Miss Wolter' (p. 28), 'Frau Kaufmann' (p. 120), 'St Paulin' (p. 110), are not consistently English or German. The name Blandine itself is German, while English would more usually follow the Latin form Blandina. These things are small blemishes, but they make reading awkward.

The important thing about this book is its portrayal of a completely humble nun, whose simple ideal of holiness was to 'live for love' in complete dedication to the Will of God attained by consistent self-abnegation. Her self-effacing holiness was so hidden that her life on earth seemed outwardly so ordinary: and perhaps the occasional accounts in this book of trivialities of school or convent life, seemingly unworthy of record, do in fact underline her simple and normal exterior. Sanctity is, after all, made of heroic stuff, and is more than merely 'being good'. There may indeed be many such souls in the convents of the world, but it is always good and encouraging to learn of one more. It will be a glory to the great Ursuline Congregation of Calvarienberg, if this simple story becomes more widely known and Sister Blandine's merits are recognized.

The book may be obtained from the Reverend Mother of the Ursuline Convent, Kettering, Northants: a foundation made from Calvarienberg in 1938, and the only one of that Congregation in England.