

Blessed Maria Bernarda (Verena Butler)

1848-1924

Born in 1848 in the Canton of Argovia, this Swiss Capuchin nun entered the Convent of Mary Help of Christians in Altstätten in 1867.

After her religious profession in 1871, she became a teacher and, subsequently, supervisor, mistress of novices in 1879, and superior in 1880. In 1888, she left for Ecuador with seven other nuns. She settled in the Diocese of Portoviejo, where she taught school and took care of the sick. In 1895, because of the political turmoil, she transferred her activities to Cartagena in Colombia. The community grew rapidly, engaging in various ministries: in catechism, education, care of the sick, and assistance to the poor. In 1912, the community was recognized by the Bishop and, in 1938, took the name of the Congregation of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians. Mother Bernarda dealt with great familiarity with the Angels, in particular with her own Guardian Angel and with the Holy Archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. Once the Archangel Saint Michael appeared to her in a new way. During the spiritual exercises of 1922, the "Great Holy Angel," as she used to call him, appeared to her for the first time and offered to be her guide and protector. From that moment on, she walked always under the protection of this glorious conqueror of the infernal dragon, who never abandoned her. Like a very strict teacher, he would admonish her as soon as she committed the smallest mistake and demanded severe penances of her for the slightest imperfections. He would constantly urge her to perform all kinds of good works and multiply her prayers of supplication. During the last two years of her life, years of passive purification in the dark night of the soul, he molded her to a great sanctity, encouraging her in the way of perfection and opening up for her ever greater possibilities in the mystery of charity. On her part, Mother Bernarda listened to her guide with childlike confidence and profound veneration. She would invite him to accompany her in the prayers she would recite, after receiving Communion, for the

Church, for sinners and priests and for the souls in Purgatory. Sister Maria Bernarda referred to these two years during which she received a strict formation from Saint Michael as "a real prison, but a prison that caused no anguish, a prison that brought joy and peace of heart." She died on the morning of May 19, 1924, at the precise moment when she would daily receive Holy Communion, with great peace, despite the enormous sufferings that had caused her sickness. When her body was exhumed in 1926, the authorities discovered that a cross had been



neatly engraved on her forehead, a post-mortem sign of her intimate union with the Passion of the Lord, from which she had received also the stigmata.