



## WHO IS SAINT GENNARO?

Saint Gennaro never made headlines during his lifetime. Very little is known about him except that he was bishop of Benevento, Italy, and died a martyr in 305 A.D., during the persecution spearheaded by Emperor Diocletian.

Actually, the zealous prelate seems to have signed his death warrant when he risked the wrath of local pagan officials by visiting the deacons Sosso and Proculo and the laymen Eutichete and Acuzio in jail. The warden observing this stranger trying to comfort the Christian prisoners naturally concluded that he must be a Christian. Therefore, he too must be shut up behind bars.

Shortly afterwards, the proconsul Timothy had Gennaro arrested and clapped into jail. Subsequently he underwent various forms of torture, without wavering in his resolution to remain loyal to Christ.

The proconsul's agents then had the generous confessor of the faith thrown headlong into a furnace, fully convinced that the flames would reduce him to ashes. By the grace of God he came through unscathed. Furious, the agents gave themselves no rest until their victim had been sentenced to be beheaded.

Gennaro, who had refused to bow his head in cowardly fashion at a pagan leader's bidding, surrendered it to the steel's deathblow. His companions shared a similar fate.

The bishop's body and the severed head still dripping blood were gathered up by an old man who wrapped them reverently in a cloth. A good woman of Naples dried up the blood with a sponge and filled a phial with the precious red liquid. The body of Saint Gennaro is preserved in Naples, where he is honored as the city's principal patron.

## MIRACLE OF THE BLOOD OF SAINT GENNARO

It would scarcely be accurate to say that Saint Gennaro has never made headlines since the day his lifeless body collapsed at the feet of imperially-backed cutthroats. The truth is that the bishop of Benevento whom the Church honors on September 19, has been in the news again and again over the last fifteen centuries. In parts of Italy he still rates front-page coverage today, chiefly in connection with the recurring prodigy of the liquefaction of his blood.

You who are reading this may have heard about it. You, like thousands of believers and unbelievers alike, may have asked certain bewildering questions: How can this happen? Is there a genuine miracle of divine power involved? Or can it be explained through natural causes?

The blood of Saint Gennaro is contained in two glass phials of different shapes and sizes. Both phials are perfectly sealed and are enclosed in a metal case which permits them to be exposed to view. The blood in the larger phial reaches about the halfway mark; in the smaller container only a few drops are seen adhering to the bottom.

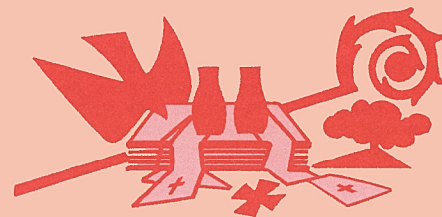
And prodigy? This martyr's blood, which is normally solidified and of a dark color, occasionally becomes liquid and reddish, sometimes frothing, bubbling up, and increasing in volume. This usually occurs twice a year: on the first Sunday of May, the feast of the transfer of the Saint's relics; also on September 19, the anniversary of his martyrdom.

This miracle of the blood, as it is popularly called, has naturally sparked no end of heated discussion and

controversy. Various explanations involving the interplay of certain forces and factors have been brought forward over the years by earnest students of the phenomenon. So far, no one has come up with any clue that satisfies the general public. No one knows for sure how this liquefaction takes place at certain precise times.

Tradition has it that the prodigy happened for the first time about four decades after Gennaro's death, when his relics were being removed to the catacombs of Naples. Accompanying the cortege that memorable day was Eusebia, the woman who had originally gathered the martyred bishop's blood and who now carried it in the phial along the processional march. Suddenly the dark solidified mass became a vivid, life like red liquid.

The recurrence of this marvel down the centuries, and even in our time, guarantees that the prestige which Gennaro has constantly enjoyed will scarcely diminish in the foreseeable future. The loyal Neapolitans will never neglect their principal patron or thrust devotion to him into the distant background.



## NEAPOLITAN FOLKLORE

The people of Naples have reached their own conclusions about Saint Gennaro. In their opinion he is not merely a "specialist" to invoke in certain situations, but a "general practitioner" to whom they can have recourse in all needs and circumstances.

They pray to him for protection from fire, earthquake, and the eruptions of Vesuvius; for preservation from plagues and droughts; in short, for all the favors and blessings they need or desire. In every emergency Saint Gennaro is their powerful champion and universal helper.

Each year on the first Sunday of May, the blood of their venerated patron preserved in two phials and his head enclosed in a silver reliquary are carried in procession. The crowds wend their way from the Duomo of Naples to the Franciscan Church of Saint Clare, where the miraculous liquefaction takes place. The statues of several saints, including Saint Joseph and Saint Anthony of Padua, are likewise borne in the procession, which is often described as the procession "of the wreathed," because of the garlands used on this occasion.

The annual highlight is the solemn commemoration which the Neapolitans hold in their cathedral on September 19. Civil and church authorities are on hand, as are also vast numbers of the laity. The procession forms with the congregation singing the Litany of the Saints. When the prodigy of the liquefaction takes effect, the priest exhibits the phials of liquefied blood in full view of the gathering. A joyous *Te Deum* is sung and clergy and laity approach to venerate the relics of the ever-popular patron.

Nobody in Naples would care to miss that redletter event in honor of Saint Gennaro.