



Ecce Agnus Dei
by Albert Chevallier Tayler

Albert Chevallier Tayler was an English artist who lived from 1862 to 1925. He specialized in portrait and genre painting, which means he often painted ordinary people of his day engaged in the simple activities of everyday life. Tayler was a devout Catholic who lived and socialized amongst nonreligious artist friends who not-so-jokingly told him that his only flaw was his “insistence on attending church on Sunday.” He painted many marvelous scenes from 19th century life in England. But as Tayler matured in age and faith, the subjects of his paintings became more and more Catholic. His paintings of St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Francis of Assisi are among his most striking works. Here we see his lovely “**Ecce Agnus Dei**” (Latin for “*Behold the Lamb of God*”) depicting a First Holy Communion Mass. The full bridal gowns and veils for the first communicants, altar boy in humble posture before the Lamb of God, and the tabernacle on the altar surrounded by the six tall candles were all typical in Tayler’s day. As viewers look upon this painting today, many feel a sense of peaceful nostalgia. Tayler’s use of warm earth tone colors aided him in the arduous task of depicting a sublime serenity. When viewing this piece of art, one’s thoughts can often harken back to their own First Holy Communion day -- a good exercise from time to time for all Catholics. What warm and tender details linger in our memories of our own First Holy Communion?

Reading some of the Saints’ memories of their First Holy Communion experiences can be edifying. Let’s consider three saints who lived in the time of Albert Chevallier Tayler and who might have experienced a First Communion much like he pictured in his *Ecce Agnus Dei*. **St. Therese of Lisieux** recounted her First Communion, which took place in 1884 when she was eleven years old: *“How lovely it was, that first kiss of Jesus in my heart – it was truly a kiss of love. I knew that I was loved and said, “I love You and I give myself to You forever. . . . Long before that, He and little Therese had seen and understood one another well, but on that day it was more than a meeting. It was a complete fusion. We were no longer two, for Therese had disappeared like a drop of water lost in the mighty ocean. Jesus alone remained – the Master and the King.”* **St. Gemma Galgani**, who received her First Communion in 1887 at age nine (and is the patron saint of First Communicants), happily reminisced: *“Jesus made Himself felt very strongly by my poor soul. I understood at that moment that the delights of heaven are not like those of the earth. I felt myself overcome by the desire to render that union with my God continual. I felt weary of the world more and more, and more disposed to recollection. It was that same morning that Jesus gave me the great desire to be a religious.”* **St Elizabeth of the Trinity** was ten years old when she received her First Communion in 1891. She vividly remembered crying tears of joy upon her reception, and then remarking to a young friend as they left the church together, *“I’m no longer hungry. Jesus has fed me.”* Years later she wrote to a friend who had just made her First Communion: *“If Jesus came this morning into your little heart, it was not to pass through it and go away, but to remain there always.”*

In this painting, Albert Chevallier Tayler touches on the deep, profound longing in all our hearts and souls for God. It gives comforting confirmation to admiring viewers of just how blessed we are to receive Our Lord and Savior in the Blessed Sacrament.

When we long for Jesus to come to us in Holy Communion, but we cannot physically receive Him due to circumstances beyond our control, that longing can still be fulfilled. Church tradition gives us means to make a “Spiritual Communion.” When done earnestly and faithfully, a Spiritual Communion allows us to receive the graces of Holy Communion even when we cannot receive it sacramentally. How? After recollecting our self, readying our soul through an examination of conscience and repentantly praying an Act of Contrition, we make a Spiritual Communion by praying this prayer (which was written by St. Alphonsus Liguori):

“My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Blessed Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire You in my soul. Since I cannot now receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. As though You are already there, I embrace You and unite myself wholly to You; do not let me ever be separated from You. Amen.”