

TERESA MARGARET OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS
(Anne Mary Redi, 1747-1770)
Saint (D)

Teresa Margaret was born at Arezzo on July 15, 1747, into the noble Redi family and was baptized Anne Mary. Guided to a deep sense of piety, she could already be called a little contemplative at the age of six, when she asked whoever was capable of answering her: «Tell me, who is this God?» Her tendency towards recollection and prayer was accentuated during her years spent at boarding-school in the Benedictine monastery of St. Apollonia in Florence, where she was given a discreet liturgical instruction. Meanwhile her spiritual life deepened in Eucharistic and Marian piety and (despite the obstacle of surroundings which were prone to Jansenism) in devotion to the Sacred Heart. The protagonist of this formation was her very devout father, Ignatius Redi, who was also her spiritual father. On her return to the family circle Anne Mary revealed her vocation to Carmel, a vocation of which she became certain during the last months of her schooling. On Sept. 1, 1764, she entered the monastery of St. Teresa in Florence. She received the Carmelite habit on March 11, 1765, with the name of Teresa Margaret of the S. Heart of Jesus. At the age of twenty-two peritonitis cut short her life on March 7, 1770. Pius XI beatified her on June 9, 1929, and canonized her on March 13, 1934.

With the miracle that unexpectedly suspended the normal process of corruption after death and restored a mysterious beauty to her corpse, God brought to light the hidden death of this very young nun whose brief existence had been employed solely in hiding herself from the eyes of all, in order to live «hid with Christ in God» (Col. 3:3). Her life was devoid of any eventful or extraordinary «superstructure»; rather, it was rooted in the theological humus that allowed her to penetrate the highest dogmatic truths with a purity of faith that became contemplative experience. Hers was a life without doctrinal documents; the writings that the modern historian acknowledges as hers are restricted to some letters, to various notes to another nun, to the text of resolutions for the retreat of 1768, and to a very brief resolution traced out with her own blood (see *Ephemerides Carmeliticae*, X /1959/, pp. 261-407). Yet it was a life which, enflamed and consumed by the thirst of loving her God, demonstrates once again that God is not reached by the intellect, but by love.

The function of Teresa Margaret in the history of spirituality does not consist in being a «teacher,» but a «witness.» A perfect Carmelite, she was a living testimony of the spirituality of Carmel, which, when it is lived without compromise in its ascetical expressions and in its contemplative substance, is capable of leading a soul to the most intimate union with God and of realizing a most efficacious synthesis between the contemplative life and apostolic commitment.

The testimony of her spiritual director, Fr. Ildephonse of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, at the canonical processes, allows us to penetrate the silence of her life and to describe with precision the theological itinerary of her soul. She was led on a genuinely Teresian path, from the assiduous contemplation of the humanity of Jesus, the Incarnate Word, to the

deep experiences of divine life. In fact, her devotion to the Heart of Jesus explains all the aspects of her spiritual and religious life.

Fr. Ildephonse tells us how the saint considered the Sacred Heart as the «center of love by which the Divine Word, even when in the bosom of the Father, has loved us throughout all eternity, and with which He has in time merited so that we, with the same shared love, can love Him in return on earth and in heaven» (Ordinary Process, 1175). This meaning of devotion to the Sacred Heart, understood as a «loving in return ... the source of Him Who has loved us so much,» can be inserted perfectly into the life of a Carmelite. For, St. Teresa of Jesus has made the Carmelite vocation a practice of divine intimacy, an exchange of love—that is, a «friendship»—between the soul and God (see *Way of Perfection*, I, 2). This devotion also succeeded in rooting Teresa Margaret in her contemplative vocation. It made her pass from the interior and hidden life of the human soul of Jesus to the experience of the mystery of the Word in the bosom of the Trinity: «I understood quite well,» testifies Fr. Ildephonse, «that she was called to imitate through faith... the life and the internal and hidden actions of the intellect and will, that is to say, the sublime acts of knowledge and affection, of the most sacred humanity of Jesus Christ, hypostatically united to the Word» (*Ord. Proc.*, 1103). Teresa Margaret, having become a Trinitarian soul, was able to express to her director «the highest truths about this divine mystery, regarding both the relative and the eternal activity of the Divine Persons among Themselves» (*ib.*, 1405). Rapt by the mystery of the divine inhabitation, she was able to repeat, with boundless joy, the Pauline text: «the temple of God is holy, which you are» (I *Cor.* 3:17), and that of the Gospel: «the kingdom of God is within you» (*Lk.* 17:21).

A great contemplative grace, received on one of the Sundays after Pentecost in 1767, allowed her to penetrate the text of St. John: «God is charity» (I *Jn.* 4: 16). Read at the chapter of terce, it had given a decisive thrust to her understanding and living out the richness of the Trinitarian inhabitation in the soul: «She related divine things to me,» so speaks Fr. Ildephonse, «revealing that this charity is the same love with which God loves Himself from all eternity; it is the spirit of God, that is, His life and breath, which is the Holy Spirit. ... Further, when it is said that he who is in charity is in God and God in him, this means that he lives of the life of God and God, in a certain way, lives of his life» (*Ord. Proc.*, 1184) The experiential and mystical invasion of her soul by the Holy Spirit nourished her intense devotion to the same Spirit, to Whom «she had recourse with all security and confidence, begging Him never to be idle in her heart, but ever to inflame and to spread His charity in it» (*ib.*, 1409). Meanwhile, under the dynamic hold of this uncreated Love there were aroused within her the most ardent apostolic desires, the most intense need of procuring the good of the Church and of souls with her prayers and sacrifices.

It was also her devotion to the Sacred Heart, understood as a «rendering of love for love» and deepened by the grace of the truth, «God is charity», that became the precious instrument of God in her consummation. At first Teresa Margaret experienced within herself her reply to the love of God. But very soon thereafter the Lord, in order to stimulate this reply to an infinite degree, left her only with the realization of the

consuming divine love that overwhelmed her and demanded an exchange of love, but deprived her of an awareness of her own corresponding love. Fr. Ildephonse defines this suffering as «a mortal pain of love» (ib., 1210). He saw her «completely transformed by this excess of love, which presented her with the excellence and the infinite merit of the beloved Object, but which to her seemed ever more tenuous and weak to the degree that it instead increased in her» (ib., 1209). This martyrdom of love — «she loved without believing she loved» — was the real cause of her early death (ib., 1211); it also made the last period of her life a heroic witness to fraternal charity, by which the saint sought to correspond to the love of her God in an impassioned degree.

The efficacy of this fraternal charity made her the humble servant, not only of her sick — she was infirmarian almost continuously — but of all the religious. She was always ready, loveable, forgetful of self, most willing to take on the most fatiguing tasks of the community. She worked with a constant smile which hid the suffering and the fatigue and was a silent invitation to turn to her for any act of charity whatever. It was the veil that covered over her uninterrupted asceticism of the daily virtues. This concrete way in which Teresa Margaret reacted to the mysterious suffering that consumed her — this dedicating herself to the needs of the other nuns as the proof of her insatiable need for loving the Lord — was the final word of her witness. It is the way of all the saints: those who arrive at the perfection of the love of God actualize its consummation in the fullness of fraternal charity.

We conclude with the testimony of her confessor, Fr. Ildephonse, as reported in the Report on the life and virtues of Sister T. M. R. (In *Ephemerides Carmeliticae*, IV /1950/, pp. 519-68), in which the basic thrusts of this very young saint's spirituality are pointed out: «Of her charity towards her neighbor, in whom she truly revered and loved the living image of God, there would be too much to say, since even as a child she had appeared transformed by the necessities of her neighbor. Of special note, however, was her tender, patient and compassionate charity towards the sick; thus, whether she was infirmarian or not, immediately after her profession she always had one of the more needy and more difficult nuns entrusted to her particular care by the superior. In the end, she was granted a consolation she had much desired and asked of God, namely, to die with such a task entrusted to her. The year proceeding her death, she obtained permission from her director to live the hidden life of Jesus Christ within herself. She understood this as not only living, so to speak, unseen and unnoticed by the other religious, but also in a certain manner to be hidden and unknown to herself, to die to herself without knowing it and without tasting any pleasure in this mystical and spiritual death. This meant burying in Christ every thought and reflection about herself, even those of a spiritual and eternal nature. God concurred in fulfilling these great desires, testing her by means of the most painful spiritual desolations.

«If a person were allowed to interpret the works of God, he could perhaps — knowing how much the fire of her love for God had become strong and punishing, because over restricted — conjecture that love itself either accelerated her death or was its immediate cause. This death followed, after only eighteen hours of a most painful illness, on the 7th of March of the year 1770, about two o'clock in the afternoon. Teresa

Margaret died with her head resting on her dear crucifix and with her arms modestly embracing it in the most composed and devout posture imaginable. Her passing resembled a peaceful sleep more than a sorrowful death» (ms. ff. 120-3).

The oldest iconography depends upon the portraits painted immediately after her death by a woman artist, A. Piatoli (*Ord. Proc.*, 1072; *Rom. Proc.*, 979), and preserved in the Florentine monastery of St. Teresa.

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