

TERESA MARY OF THE CROSS (1846-1910)

Servant of God (D)

Born of a humble family at San Martino a Campi Bisenzio (Florence) on March 2, 1846, Teresa Manetti humbly dedicated her youthful years to good works. She was sustained by a luminous faith that was fostered by trials. She lost her father while quite young and so had to help her mother. She did so without forgetting the poor and the little ones, for whom she gave up her sleep and helped with whatever alms she was able to collect. Because she gave herself to all, everyone loved her and gave her the nickname «Bettina.»

In 1868 she joined Assuntina Biagiotti, who wished to open a religious house; but also because of the premature death of Assuntina (1870), this plan was not realized. In 1872 together with two companions, Teresa began to live a common life in her family home; then, in 1874, the small community transferred to a modest house below the embankment of the Bisenzio, near the chapel of St. Justus. And here Teresa and her companions «prayed, worked and gathered girls, providing them with good reading matter and Christian doctrine.» On July 16, 1874, they were admitted to the Teresian Third Order by Don Earnest Jacopozzi (1844-94), who in 1871 had arrived at San Martino as chaplain and had very soon become a collaborator in the work of Bettina. Bettina herself, as a tertiary, had taken the new name of Teresa Mary of the Cross.

After some years of preparation, in 1877 the modest house was opened to the first orphans, who gradually increased in number and became the «most precious treasure» of the Mother and of Don Jacopozzi. In view of caring for these orphans, and with an act of trust in Providence, in 1879 Teresa acquired the chapel of St. Justus and the small houses adjacent to it, which she soon made over into a small convent, more adequate for her works of charity. Beside it, she built a larger church, which was inaugurated in 1887. Meanwhile the institute grew, with the opening of the first filial foundations; aggregated to the Order of Discalced Carmelites on June 12, 1885, its proper characteristics shone still better in the light of Carmel. Mother Teresa and the first twenty-seven religious received the Carmelite habit on July 12, 1888. With the exception of four who remained novices, they made their profession on the following day. In 1891 the institute obtained definite diocesan approbation; and on March 13, 1900, Pope Leo XIII promulgated the «decree of praise» for the «Carmelite Oblates of St. Teresa,» a name that was later changed to «Third Order Carmelite Sisters of St. Teresa.» This occurred on Feb. 27, 1904, when St. Pius X approved and confirmed the institute and also approved the constitutions on an experimental basis.

Under the wise guidance of Mother Teresa, the new congregation, animated by a true Carmelite spirit, went on expanding. In realization of an old prophetic dream, with twelve houses opened in Tuscany, Teresa was able to add two on the Carmelite missions in Syria and one on the slopes Of Carmel, at Haifa. She gave individual attention to the foundations and to the religious, with the strength of a mother who wished her daughters to be poor and detached from everything, truly tending towards God alone as they served His orphans and little ones. She herself was the servant of all. Despite her

own precarious health, she was forgetful of self as she sought to pour out joy and her smile upon all who approached her. The witnesses at the process of beatification are unanimous in declaring that everyone who met her was impressed by her trust in God and by her serene abandonment to Providence, and felt himself the better person for it. And as the years passed, Teresa was more and more besieged by crowds of people, especially on Sundays. Lines of persons of every class and condition awaited their turn to be heard and consoled by her. She was able to unite them to the Lord, give counsels of heavenly wisdom, heal ills which resisted the efforts of science, read hearts, see into the future, cut down distances, multiply goods and money. These are the «little flowers» that are in evidence on every page of the canonical processes, little flowers that, while they reveal charismatic facts, also show her exceptional availability for her neighbors, even at times of greatest pain. Bishop Andrew Cassullo, who had known her intimately, affirmed in her regard: «She undid herself doing good.»

The source of such a dedication was her life of faith and of theological charity, the great virtues of her life which nourished her Eucharistic fervor and gave her the strength to live out her religious name, «of the Cross,» in its deepest significance. She lived on prayer; and she had the gift of a continual communion with the Lord, so that, as one witness recalls in regard to a personal affirmation of the servant of God, «for her it was the same to be enclosed in a convent or to deal with people, because everywhere she felt herself united to God.» This habitual union found its nourishment in Eucharistic piety. She had great devotion for the Eucharist even as a child. During the institute's first years she went into ecstasy almost every day after Communion; later, too, in the Eucharistic presence she felt something that drew her out of herself.

One of her great hopes was a house entirely dedicated to the perpetual adoration of the Eucharist. She was able to realize this in Florence, where on Jan. 11, 1902, in the church of Corpus Domini, which she had built, the Blessed Sacrament was solemnly exposed. It was in contact with Christ that her apostolic desires increased; hence she exclaimed: «I should like to make all hearts into one and plunge it into the heart of Jesus.» Moreover, the love of Jesus bound her more intimately to Our Lady, whose tenderness and care for Jesus she herself wished to have. Happy to be a Carmelite, she saw in her Carmelite vocation a commitment to belong to Our Lady more deeply and to spread devotion to her.

Yet her great vocation and mission was the cross. She saw Christ on the cross and wished to be crucified with Him at any cost. She wanted the feast of Sept. 14, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, to be her nameday. It was not rare that on that day, while the community sang to honor the cross, she was rapt in ecstasy. But for her, the most beautiful ecstasy was a living participation in the passion of Christ. She had called upon the Lord: «Crush me, press me, make me trickle drop by drop into the divine reservoir!» And the Lord took her at her word. She never lacked difficulties; she had to face real persecutions, from which she felt spiritually freed by the cry: «Long live the cross!»

But her severest trials awaited her during her last years. She was devoured by a most painful cancer, and at the same time she suffered the martyrdom of a frightful mystical

«night,» which seems to have been an atoning conformity to Christ and an apostolic offering for the Church. The obscurity of faith, the inability to pray, the experience of abandonment by God, the profound awareness of her own misery and the power of Satan, joined with the fear of damnation and of despair, were the spiritual side of the tragedy. On the human side there was a painful counterpart: besides the inexorable pace of her illness, Teresa had the humiliation of a month of internment in the Casanova nursing home of Florence towards the end of 1909.

This was her «way of the cross» which she followed faithfully and generously to the end. Even in the darkest hours she humbly clung to God, thanking Him for the pain, asking Him for the grace of an unconditioned fidelity. She went on repeating her «Fiat!» (her usual aspiration), together with the ejaculation: «Lord, crush me, press me, even to the last drop!» And just when this great sacrifice was demanded of her, her apostolic activity expanded. Though personally surrounded by the thickest obscurity, she had words of light and of comfort for everyone else. While she herself felt that she no longer believed in anything and that she was damned, to others she gave advice filled with the certainties of our holy faith and of the most precious hopes. While she had the new experience of abandonment by God, she communicated the fullness of God to all who approached her, by her word, by her smile, by her example. This is what happened at the «Casanova» as well; she introduced a ray of grace, leading more than one soul and even a well-known doctor back to God.

Thus prepared by grace, she kept repeating, «O my Jesus, ... yes, I still want to suffer,» when she went to meet death, which occurred at San Martino a Campi Bisenzio on April 23, 1910. She was murmuring in ecstasy: «It is open! ... I am coming!» The remains were provisionally interred in a chapel of Fornelli; in 1912 they were transferred to the institute's church at San Martino.

The ordinary processes for the cause of beatification took place between 1930 and 1936. After the writings of the servant of God had been approved (Nov. 27, 1937), her cause was introduced in Rome on July 30, 1944 (AAS, XXXVI /1944/, pp. 337-40). The apostolic processes were held between 1946 and 1949.

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