

BLESSED ANNA MARIA TAIGI,
A MYSTIC IN THE FAMILY

BY

H. C. GRAEF



SIENA may be called the city of unusual vocations. There is St Catherine, who brought back the Pope from Avignon and was espoused to our Lord; St Bernardine, ardent Apostle of the Name of Jesus, and, very near our own time, Bl. Anna Maria Taigi, mother of a large family, mystic and confidante of Popes. She was born in the same year as Napoleon (1769) with whose family she was later brought into close relation. Unlike in this to her great compatriot, she gave no early signs of future sanctity. She was the daughter of an apothecary, a spendthrift who went to Rome with his family when Anne was six. She was sent to a convent school where she learned embroidery and afterwards her father found her a job as housemaid with a rich lady of doubtful reputation. In her house she spent three years, learning all the secrets of female vanity and becoming conscious of her own attraction for men. It was a perilous position for a poor and pretty young girl, and the dangers were not altogether removed even when, in 1790, she married Domenico Taigi, a valet in the Palazzo Chigi, considerably older than herself. During the first year of her marriage she fully gave herself up to the pleasures of the world; her husband bought her trinkets and fine dresses and took her to dances and other amusements. It was the time when Europe was shaken by the French Revolution, and soon she began to feel strange scruples about the life of vanity and empty pleasures which she was leading. One day a Servite priest met her, walking in the road with Domenico, and he heard an interior voice saying to him: 'Look at this woman. I shall one day entrust her to you. You will convert her because I have chosen her for a Saint'.

At the end of the year, soon after the birth of her first child, Anne went to confession to a Servite Father unknown to her and was received with the words: 'So you have come at last. Be of good cheer, my child; God loves you, and in return he asks for your whole heart'. From that day a new life began for her; a life lived in the most humdrum circumstances of a numerous family, harassed by crushing work and constant poverty which she met with the most absolute trust in divine Providence which, indeed, never failed her. Yet this to all appearances quite ordinary life was pervaded by the supernatural life of grace, by grace that is not hindered by material obstacles, but rather uses them as the consummate sculptor uses a block of marble, transforming the hard bulk of the stone into a wonder of spiritual beauty.

Here was a chosen soul, not in the cloister protected by rules, reminded of her Creator at all hours of day and night by bells,

Office and periods of prayer, but in a small house, with an exacting husband, a cantankerous mother, and an increasing number of children and later also of grandchildren, all depending on her for food, dress, cleanliness and the innumerable requirements of a large household. How is it possible to lead the most exalted mystical life in such circumstances?

Shortly after her conversion Anna Maria was told by our Lady that it was her special vocation to show to the world that sanctity can be attained in every walk of life, even without extraordinary bodily penances, but on one condition: the perfect mortification of self-will. It seems that this was precisely the reason why divine Providence had placed her in a position so apparently unfavourable to the development of the mystic life. She fulfilled the condition to perfection. She served her husband with the utmost humility, obeying him as if he were the Lord himself, leaving bishops and princesses who came to consult her in order to undo Domenico's shoes when he came home and to place his dinner on the table. She bore with her gossiping mother who spoiled her children, and whom she nursed in a repulsive illness without receiving a word of thanks in return; she supported her father who refused to work; she brought up her three boys and four girls and she kept the peace in a house full of the most violent and divergent temperaments. Where, in this overcrowded life, could there be a place for contemplative prayer?

Yet mystic graces were showered on her almost from the beginning of her conversion. From that time all through her life she enjoyed the same extraordinary gift as St Hildegard: she saw before her a 'mystic sun', a brilliant globe of light encircled by a crown of thorns in which she read the future as well as events in distant places with perfect clarity; but she never used this gift unless charity or obedience demanded it. During the first years of her mystic life ecstasies were frequent: suddenly, while she was at table or doing housework, her eyes would close, her limbs grow rigid, and Domenico would angrily shout at her: why must she go to sleep in the middle of the day?—but there was no answer. The children would cry, thinking their mother was dead. After Holy Communion she was almost always in ecstasy, and our Lord often appeared to her in the Blessed Sacrament. After she had been received into the Third Order of the Holy Trinity, which she had chosen because of her ardent devotion to this greatest of the Christian mysteries, he revealed to her her special vocation: 'Know', he said, 'that I have chosen you to convert sinners and to console those who suffer in every walk of life, priests and religious and even my Vicar himself. You will meet with falsehood and perfidy, you will be mocked, despised and calumniated, but you will endure it all for love of me'.

The prophecy was soon to be fulfilled. After the joyous spring of her spiritual life, rich with sensible graces, there followed dark

years of desolation. She had the most violent temptations to doubt and even to hatred of God, and seemed no longer to know the meaning of love. She seemed to herself completely abandoned by the divine mercy, feeling as if confined to a corner of hell, though, strangely enough, her supernatural lights never failed her. At the same time she was overwhelmed with exterior trials: priests refused her Holy Communion, neighbours accused her of secret sins, and she was afflicted by mysterious and very painful illnesses. For it seems that God opposed the humble housewife to Napoleon, who imprisoned the Pope and persecuted the Church, as a victim of expiation. She foretold his fall with precise details and knew the most intimate sentiments of the dying Emperor. In 1815 his mother, Madame Letizia, and his brother Cardinal Fesch came to live near her in Rome, and under the influence of Anne, whom they venerated, both became devout. One day, when the Cardinal asked her to pray for the recovery of his sister, she answered with the holy liberty of the saints: 'Tell her Highness to meditate on these three points: what she has been, what she is, and what she will be, and at the same time to prepare herself for death'. Yet she was not strong enough to overcome their longings to revive past greatness, and in 1831 they prepared to dethrone Gregory XVI and to crown Napoleon's son Emperor of Rome. Anne, who like St Catherine endured agonies for the Church, saw their preparations in her mystic sun, denounced the plot to the authorities, and paid for the delivery by untold sufferings. The same happened when the peace of the Church was threatened by socialism and the machinations of the Carbonari, in fulfilment of our Lord's words to her: 'I have chosen you to be counted among my martyrs by an invisible martyrdom. None will know, none will understand, only I'.

The mystery of expiation by suffering is a difficulty to many who yet accept without questioning the expiation of the Cross and the claim of St Paul to have been counted worthy to fill up in his body on behalf of the Church what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Yet from the time of the martyrs, whose blood the Fathers called the 'seed of the Church', the Church has always counted on the sufferings of her members to continue the work of her Head. The faith was spread throughout Europe by martyrs and the heroic sufferings of confessors. To the mystery of iniquity there will be always opposed the mystery of suffering, to the Tree of Forbidden Knowledge the Tree of the Cross, to infidelity self-sacrifice, to the lust and cruelty of the great the pains and penances of the humble. This is the mysterious and hidden law of the supernatural world, of which we are sometimes allowed glimpses in the lives of the Saints, though they are rarely so clear as in the lives of St Catherine or Bl. Anne Taigi. Both cooperated to the full with the designs of divine Providence; for Anne, too, never allowed herself any distractions to alleviate her trials. She understood perfectly our Lord's words to her, which sound almost as if they came from

St Catherine's *Dialogue*: 'True sanctity consists in bearing patiently interior and exterior trials. A soul which suffers patiently the tribulations which come to her through the medium of creatures is greater than one who gives herself to works of penance'.

Yet, no more than St Catherine, did she dispense herself from corporal austerities, which all the Saints have embraced as eagerly as the children of this world seek for comfort and riches. Though her husband and children were watching her, she contrived to deprive herself of drink for days and sometimes weeks in the hot Roman summer. She ate extremely little and that mostly standing, while serving the others, and taking for herself the worst pieces. She used disciplines and hairshirts, made pilgrimages barefoot, yet never neglected her domestic duties.

It is by such a life as this, of obedience and self-effacement, that miracles are accomplished. One day, when Anne was ill, our Lord appeared to her, took her right hand in his and told her to rise. From that time she suffered almost constant pains in that hand, which increased on Fridays, but, in exchange, she had received the gift of healing. With it, she effected innumerable cures; one of the most famous was that of the Queen of Etruria, Marie-Louise de Bourbon, whom she healed of epilepsy. She also healed souls, and, again like St Catherine, she was a great peacemaker, who loved especially to reconcile families. But what likens her perhaps more than anything else to the great Dominican was her relation with the Papacy. She predicted the return of Pius VII from his captivity at Fontainebleau, she was consulted by him and his successors, particularly by Leo XII and Gregory XVI, who asked her advice daily, and she foretold the election of Pius IX when he was still an unknown missionary priest. It was for the Popes that she most willingly offered her sufferings, and our Lord promised her that while she lived there would be no revolution in Rome.

As her life had been spent in suffering, so her death was preceded by an illness of seven months, during which she was wracked with asthma and rheumatism, while the medical treatment she received increased rather than alleviated her pains. By a strange combination of circumstances she endured her last agony alone, as she had foretold, though her house was full of priests and relatives. When the cause of her beatification was introduced there was an extraordinary array of witnesses. For besides Cardinals and priests there were her husband, her children, her daughter-in-law, all testifying that the mystic who had known the highest regions of divine contemplation and the terrifying depths of the Dark Night, had been an exemplary mother. 'I have always found her docile and submissive like a lamb', said Domenico, and 'she arranged everything so sweetly that we did what she wanted in spite of ourselves'. It is one of the marvels of grace that, while the great ones of the world generally lose in stature when observed too closely, the Saints seem more admirable the more intimately they are known.

Yet even in the annals of sanctity it is a rare case that perfection should be recognized by a hot-tempered husband and a domineering daughter-in-law. It is a triumph of love—for the mystic life is nothing else but the full flowering of charity—a charity that beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things and endureth all things, and is finally made perfect in the Beatific Vision where both faith and hope are left behind.

A LETTER ON
TEMPTATIONS AGAINST PURITY*

BY

FERDINAND VALENTINE, O.P.

Dear David,

You have asked whether unclean thoughts which seem to saturate your mind, even in time of prayer, are due to the devil. Before I can answer this question you will have to know something about the devil's method and scope. Not a pleasant subject, I warn you.

First of all the devil cannot directly control the human mind and will. He has no means of getting inside a man's soul; this is metaphysically impossible. Should you ever read Marlowe's story of Doctor Faustus, I hope you will bear this in mind: it may be good 'theatre' but it's bad theology. The most we can say about this and similar stories is, as one writer puts it, that they contain a certain symbolic truth, and may be looked upon as the dramatic expression of the possibility of final impenitence. But literally and historically these stories are false.

Let me repeat—the devil cannot directly control the human mind and will, but he can influence them indirectly through the imagination, and even the imagination he affects only indirectly through his power over the loco-motor activity of the body. In other words, he cannot impress upon our imagination something we have never previously experienced: as St Thomas says, he cannot make a man born blind see colour. He can only revive a past experience in the imagination through his power over our

* From a forthcoming book, *The Inside of the Cup*, Theophila Correspondence No. 2 (Blackfriars Publications).