

brought into the world have been proved 'the weather-bitten conduits of many Kings' reigns', carrying the waters of grace from heaven to earth. It is too much to ask them to sing their own praises (in Dante the panegyric on Francis is pronounced by a Dominican and that on Dominic by a Franciscan, whereas the denunciations of unworthy Dominicans and Franciscans is in each case pronounced by one of themselves), but they can at least set up their ideals so as to beat their own breasts and call the world to praise not themselves but those men who first raised the standards. And always let it be remembered there will be some secret treasure too precious to be brought out of hiding. *Sacramentum regis abscondere bonum est*. Yet even that does not explain it; it is not simply a precious family secret that we won't share; it is something that is so deep we can't uncover it to share. St Dominic's flagstone in Santa Sabina is at once a sign and a guarantee of a father's love that stretches over seven centuries and rests on the dusty little black suits that move around the slums of Hampstead and Walker and Whit Lane. Almost his last words were: 'I am going where I can serve you better'. As they stood round his deathbed the brethren had been grieved, but now he was gone no one could feel any heaviness. Already his service had begun and he stood where he has stood ever since—by the throne of the Great Judge as advocate for his little flock of poor ones.



## MOTHER THERESE COUDERC

BY

A MEMBER OF HER CONGREGATION

**T**HE year 1885 saw the passing of one of the great spiritual figures of that century: Mother Thérèse Couderc, Co-foundress of the Cenacle. Her contemporaries witness that at her death 'there passed away a glory from the earth'—and Holy Church, agreeing with their verdict, will shortly proclaim her Blessed—a model of holiness for the whole world. How did she arrive at that shining sanctity which became so transparently evident as her long life drew to a close? It was simply by being a true Christian—through a complete surrender of herself into the hands of God, allowing him to do with her exactly as he pleased

She was a woman of clear supernatural vision and good judgment. But at the age of thirty-three she was subjected to a series of misunderstandings, deposed from her office of Superior, deprived little by little of her title of Co-foundress, and she endured not only personal humiliation of the most painful kind, but the far greater agony of seeing the Cenacle pulled out of its right context and governed by one who possessed neither vision nor judgment. Contemporary accounts say that she met this trial with a humility entirely free from bitterness or resentment. The divine will, her own will and the will of creatures conspired to bring about that abasement of herself which was the necessary condition of her future sanctity.

It is said rather strangely of St Alexis, that he hid himself in his father's house and lived there for many years unrecognised, in a little room under the stairs. Mother Thérèse hid herself in the ordinary life of her own Community and, incredible as it seems, succeeded in being forgotten and ignored for the most part of her long life. The fact that she was foundress was not realised even by the Superior General herself. She intentionally sought obscurity, not from any morbid fear of responsibility but for love of our Lord forgotten and despised. She had a strong and rugged character; every step of the 'way down' must have cost her dear. She busied herself with hard manual work in house and garden; a farmer's daughter from the mountainous region of the Ardèche, she had a natural affinity with the soil.

Thérèse had learnt early in life to be thoughtful and considerate for others, for she was the eldest of a large family. When adversity plunged her into solitude and obscurity, she never drew apart from others in a false isolation. She took the greatest interest in all that affected the Community, and helped on the family life with innumerable little kindnesses; but as she lived this ordinary family life for love of Christ, God was working mightily in her, and unknown to herself, was turning her into a great contemplative.

Her early years in religion were characterised by a great 'dutyfulness'; her prayer at that time seems to have been 'an act of homage by which she returned to God all that was due to him; she unveiled her mind in his presence, for him to do with her as he willed'. The working of the virtue of religion is very apparent here. She was truly 'devoted' in the strict theological sense of the word; and she knew that God must be served. As her charity

increased her soul grew to be absorbed in God. She realised his holiness in a special manner, and by the same grace she became vividly aware of her own nothingness and misery. She understood profoundly, as few have done, what it means to be a creature.

'Our Blessed Lord as man', says Father Baker in his treatise on Humility, 'having a most perfect knowledge, perception and feeling of the nothingness of creatures and the absolute totality of God, most profoundly humbled himself before the divine majesty of his Father, remaining continually plunged in the abyss of his own nothing. He submitted himself to all creatures; as a creature he saw nothing in himself but the nothing of a creature, and in all other creatures he saw nothing but God, to whom he humbled himself in all, accepting as from him all persecution which proceeded from others.' This may be regarded too as a portrait of Mother Thérèse, the true Christian, and perhaps we may say that our Lord, eager to continue his creaturely life on earth, did so 'as her', to use the striking phrase of Father Steuart, S.J. Our Lord took the long life she had offered him in order to perpetuate the humble attitude of his human soul in adoration before the will of the Father. Sixteen years before her death, appalled by the terrible happenings in France and the insults offered to God, she offered herself solemnly to him in reparation and heard an interior voice telling her that she should be a 'victim of holocaust'—that form of sacrifice when the victim is entirely destroyed because all is for God. From that time onwards mysterious sufferings of body and mind assailed her; she shared mystically in the fear and agony of our Lord in Gethsemane; her creaturehood, like his, felt the full weight of the divine justice outraged by sin, which occasioned the 'dense and the driven Passion and frightful sweat'.

'In God's sight', says a modern writer, 'a life may be more fruitful when there is no visible fruit for men, for the treasure of that life has been discharged into the hidden foundations which bear up the visible enterprises of men. . . .' Such a life was Mother Thérèse's. She was the soil from which springs the spiritual fruitfulness of the Cenacle, and she has become the spiritual mother of many children. As humus is a necessary condition of fertility in the natural order, so in the supernatural order, her message seems to be: 'Cultivate the soil through a humble, creaturely surrender to the divine will, and he who is mighty will do great things, for holy is his Name'.