

ness to the meaning of the Word. For this is the dual task facing Catholics as they enter into the second half of the twentieth century, and at such a time for English Catholics there can be nothing better than to remember Newman's prophetic words: 'We act according to our name: Catholics are at home in every time and place, in every state of society, in every class of the community, in every stage of cultivation.'



A LITTLE-KNOWN BENEDICTINE MYSTIC

Domna Maria Caecilia Baij

S.M.J., O.S.B.

MONTEFIASCONA is a charming and very ancient city of Latium; so ancient that its origins are shrouded in the mist that envelops the strange race of the Etruscans. It crowns the mass dominating one end of the Lago di Bolsena, and its hillsides are famous for their excellent wine. Erected into an episcopal see in 1369, it has numbered in its long line of titulars several conspicuous personalities; amongst others Alessandro Farnese, later Pope Paul III, and, during Maria Caecilia's own lifetime, Cardinal Pompeo Aldobrandini.

Elected abbess of the Benedictine monastery of San Pietro, Montefiascone, for the first time in 1743, Domna Maria Caecilia Baij was re-elected six years later, and subsequently retained the office until her death in January 1766, at the age of seventy-one. During the course of her religious life, she had exercised a number of responsible offices in the monastery—portress, infirmarian, sacristan and mistress of novices. Throughout her entire existence she was dogged by persistent ill-health, to which was added the heavy trial of bitter opposition on the part of her community, the

irritating and petty jealousies of confessors, the incomprehension and criticism of certain members of the local clergy, who even managed temporarily to prejudice against her the bishop succeeding Cardinal Aldobrandini on the episcopal throne.

Domna Maria's work bears a twofold aspect. As regards herself, she had constantly before her eyes the horror of the world's sins, and accordingly she devoted herself to whole-hearted reparation. Her practices were intensified at times like Carnival, or when our Lord confided special intentions to her, such as reparation for the offences committed by consecrated souls, her own community in particular, or when he entrusted her with the care of the diocese of Montefiascone and exhorted her to labour by prayer and sacrifice for the salvation of the souls of her own city. As regards others, the holy abbess earnestly strove to exert her influence over the ungrateful task of reforming the abuses openly tolerated in her own monastery, and rampant among the clergy outside. To the latter end she laboured to establish a 'Casa Apostolica'. The aim of this work was 'the reform of the secular clergy . . . and the training of fervent and zealous young priests . . . with the hope that the example might be followed by other cities, and that other such houses might be instituted for the reform and sanctification of the clergy and the faithful'.¹ The project met with violent opposition, not least from those who felt themselves concerned. Cardinal Aldobrandini himself was, at first, averse to it; but later, he changed his views and did all he could to encourage its foundation. Maria Caecilia did not live to see the full achievement of her enterprise, but she did have the satisfaction of seeing its humble start.

The work of reforming the monastery was even more arduous. The religious were divided in opinion, and those opposed to Domna Maria openly rebelled and affronted her. Not the least of her victories was that won by her sweetness and persevering patience over her turbulent and strong-headed subjects. By the time of her death, the monastery had become a model of regular monastic observance, and the impetus of fervour and zeal she set in motion lasted for many years after her decease. Domna Maria died as had always been her wish and ardent prayer, unobtrusively and humbled even to the end. The act attesting her death which was drawn up by the confessor is frigid in its brevity.

¹ *Archiv. Monast.* A 29.

Among the many spiritual gifts which were so liberally showered upon Domna Maria, there is one exceptional grace. She describes it thus in a letter of 6th May, 1742, to her confessor. 'Yesterday evening, during meditation, which was on the Holy Ghost, since this is his novena, I was powerfully urged . . . to enter with him into a cordial friendship, and to take him as my true friend. . . . My Spouse confirmed the truth of this friendship, for the Holy Spirit lives in us and, when in a state of grace, our soul is his temple . . . This morning, after receiving Holy Communion, I saw, high above my head, a white dove emitting three rays of light . . . After a time I seemed to be in a place filled with majesty, and where our God showed himself as a great light irradiating all things, while I heard the Sanctus being thrice repeated. I found myself surrounded by our holy Father St Benedict, St John the Evangelist, St Scholastica and St Gertrude. . . . A voice was heard from the throne saying: "Bid her renew her vows." Having renewed my vows . . . I heard the voice issuing from the throne, that is from the great light that showed itself with such majesty . . . say: "As my daughter I enrich you with a new grace, and I give you my blessing." Then I beheld my Spouse holding a golden cincture; he espoused me and placed the cincture about me, saying: "By this bond I bind and unite you ever more intimately to myself." Then came the dove with the three rays, saying: "I choose you for my friend and for my dwelling, bringing you three loves; namely love of God, of the neighbour, and a holy love of yourself . . . Behold me with you, in you, as your faithful and most powerful friend . . . Be faithful in following my inspirations.'

Domna Maria was not a highly cultured person; her education had not been pursued beyond that common to most pious girls of her time. She had just enough Latin to follow the psalmody, and a rather weak hold on syntax. She was, however, an organist of talent, endowed with a quick intelligence, keen practical sense and innate good taste which would, had it been her lot, have enabled her to come a brilliant scholar. It was precisely on account of her self-diffidence and simplicity that she received so many divine favours. 'Do you know, Maria', said the Lord, 'why I tell you that you are the first among my spouses, the most believed and favoured by me? It is because, knowing your worthlessness, you humble yourself, deeming yourself unworthy to be called my

spouse, and begging instead to be admitted among the number of the lowest slaves . . . The more you will humble yourself, recognizing your nothingness, the more will you be exalted by me.² On another occasion, as the servant of God was lamenting over her misery and weakness, the Lord answered: 'Because you know your unworthiness and confess your weaknesses, I manifest myself to you; my worthiness will make you worthy, my goodness will cover up your poverty, my charity will draw you to me and unite you to Me, for I find my pleasure in you.' 'Lord', said Maria, 'I am so wicked.' 'But I am good. Do not fear; distrust yourself and trust in me.'³

Apart from the *Canzoniere*, it was not, therefore, through personal inclination that Domna Maria took up her pen. Successive confessors put her under obedience to keep a detailed written account of her spiritual life. The obedience was irksome in the extreme, and she tried several times, unsuccessfully, to be released from it. In her letters to her spiritual directors, she attempted to explain, as far as she could, the mystical phenomena that came to her, thereby contributing useful information on these difficult matters. In her 'Colloquies', the servant of God recorded the instructions she received from our Lord himself, and the explanations he vouchsafed her of the meaning of her visions. Indeed, much that was given her was not so much for herself personally as a means of teaching others, through her, something of the infinite mercy and love of God for all faithful souls. At times the command to write would come directly from God; to this we owe the works: *The Interior Life of Jesus*, *The Life of St Joseph*, *The Life of John the Baptist*.

The *Canzoniere*,⁴ which numbers about a hundred poems, was composed purely as a recreation. Domna Maria was merely giving vent to the feeling that overwhelmed her and was, in no way, aiming at literary perfection. The poems show originality of thought and a real lyrical inspiration, coupled with colourful descriptions and a sincerity of feeling expressed with freshness and charm. After 1731, Domna Maria's different employments did not leave her sufficient leisure to pursue this pastime. The *Canzoniere* includes a series of abstract and mystical concepts of God,

² Letter A. 4.

³ Letter E. 104.

⁴ Archiv. Monas.

seventeen in number, expressed in short phrases of not more than four words and bearing the same rhythmic ending:

*Sostanza unica e pura,
Bontà d'ogni fattura,
Beltà senza figura,
Lume fuor di misura, etc.*

Like St Teresa of Avila, Domna Maria was accused of being deceived by the devil; but the more she met with opposition and misunderstanding on the part of men, so much the more did God comfort and instruct her, teaching her the effects of divine love on the faithful soul. This is the subject of her short *Tract on the love of God*,⁵ in which she describes how: 'the love of God, being one in its origin, communicates itself to three categories of creatures under the form of three flames, remaining, nevertheless, one perfect love.' The first flame envelops the souls of all the blessed and the angelic spirits, increasing their ardour to love God perfectly. The second flame is directed towards mankind, that 'our hearts may be afire with love of God, that so we may perform great things for his glory'. The third flame envelops the souls in Purgatory, and while it purifies them, it inspires in them an ardent desire to be able to praise the Supreme Good for eternity; it gives them great peace in the midst of their suffering, for they recognize the work of divine justice, and understand how truly God deserves to be loved for his goodness.

Doubtless, the work that best reflects Domna Maria's state of mystical union with God is her commentary on the *Canticle of Canticles*. Cornelius a Lapide speaks of the double espousals contracted by the Word; physically with his humanity, and morally with the Church by means of his humanity. Departing from the customary interpretation of the poem, which sees in the Spouse Christ our Lord, and the Church, our Lady or the faithful soul in the Beloved, the servant of God interprets the *Canticle* as an epithalamium between the Word and the humanity he assumed. Humbly she wrote: 'Divine grace will, I hope, assist me, so that I may say all that I learn on this subject . . . for it seems to me most difficult to express the concepts that are impressed upon me, I am so ignorant and have such a poor memory . . .' and she concluded, distressed at her powerlessness to say all she felt, '. . . I have not

⁵ Archiv. Monas. Opuscole.

known how to explain myself because of my ignorance. I understood many things. . . but did not know how to explain them. . . . If there is anything good in this work, it is all God's, the errors are my part.' Space does not here permit of a further appreciation of this work which will, it is hoped, form the object of a further article.

At the time of Domna Maria's death a violent discussion arose, fomented chiefly by her adversaries, as to whether or not the servant of God had received the Stigmata. It would seem, from certain passages in the 'Colloquies', that she did. In the second book notably, she wrote that the Lord had told her 'to rest assured that not only will you receive the imprint of your crucified Beloved on the feast of the Holy Ghost, but before your death you will see in your body that which is stamped on your heart; and that which is within will show exteriorly, that is the wounds in your hands, feet and side, on your head the crown of thorns; and you will die bearing the mark of your Beloved, your Redeemer and your Spouse'. Actually, those attending the holy abbess at her death saw nothing of the promised signs, and so wondered. A saintly religious of Viterbo, Padre Colombini, who had had sufficient intercourse with Domna Maria to speak of her *en connaissance de cause*, pointed out that the fact others could not see the Stigmata did not mean that the abbess's imagination had deluded her. The Lord had always spoken in the singular—*tu vedrai*—promising her that she *herself* would see the marks, but never suggesting that they would be for public view; a hidden favour bestowed on other chosen souls.

One thing, however, was certain and clearly visible: the wonderful influence for good exerted by Domna Maria over her monastery and the whole neighbourhood, her patience and charity which never faltered however bitter the attacks against her, and the solid virtues which won for her the esteem and veneration of other saintly souls with whom she came in contact. Through her writings, the holy abbess is now becoming better known, and there is hope that her cause for beatification will soon be introduced.