

BLESSED EMILY BICCHIERI. 1238 - 1314

BY

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FROM the earliest history of monasticism in Europe religious houses, both of men and women, received children for education. Anglo-Saxon girls were not only sent to the monasteries of their own country but also to famous centres of learning abroad such as the great monastery founded by St Cesarius of Arles where the holy bishop wished his nuns to devote themselves not only to the study of the Scriptures and the Fathers but to all learning—*omnes litora*. St Gertrude of Nivelles, desirous of securing the best teachers for her monastic school, sent for them to Ireland, then the great home of learning. The love of learning was not confined to the daughters of nobles. Thomas of Cantempré, O.P. tells of a Brabant peasant girl who was welcomed by her richer sisters when she longed to learn to read her psalter. The standard of learning, of course, rose and fell as the centuries passed by and the great schools of the early Middle Ages dwindled in many places to half a dozen to a dozen children even in the larger monasteries of nuns.

When St Dominic founded the monastery of Prouille in 1207 the love of learning was again sweeping over Europe: but he had no intention of founding a house of education. This is clear from the earliest Charters of Donation to the 'Holy Preaching of Prouille' and from the instructions he laid down for the reception of young girls who were not to be received under the age of ten. They wore the habit and were bound to the observance of the Rule. In no sense were they merely schoolgirls. But because of the needs of the time in Provence very young girls might be received and kept till the age of fourteen for spiritual reasons. This referred to the children from the Albigensian 'convents' for whom shelter had to be found while they were instructed in the truths of the Faith. The need for this exception did not long outlast the holy founder's death and we find nothing mentioned about the reception of 'very young girls' in the chronicles of St Sixtus in Rome, the second monastery of nuns founded by St Dominic, where such need did not exist.

Blessed Emily Bicchieri, who was born within twenty years of St Dominic's death, was the first known to have founded a monastery of Third Order Sisters for the education of young girls. This vocation of hers was shown to her mother before her birth in a prophetic vision in which the child she bore in her womb appeared to Alessia Bicchieri

clothed as a religious and covering with a large and flowing veil a multitude of little girls.

The Bicchieri were one of the wealthiest families of Vercelli and Emily's mother was a Borromeo. Emily was the fourth of seven daughters. Her mother died when she was but a child and she became the favourite companion and best beloved of her father who could hardly bear her out of his sight. It was obvious to her that she would have to fight hard against the love of her father and, be it added, her own heart, when she realised that God was calling her to the religious life. However, when she was sixteen years old she not only obtained the consent of her father but he promised to build and endow a monastery for her and some of her friends who wished to follow her example.

The monastery of St Margaret was finished by September 1256 and before the ceremony of enclosure Emily knelt before her father and asked his forgiveness for the suffering she had caused him. In speaking of enclosure we must be careful not to project our modern ideas on the subject into the 13th century. St Dominic had made the enclosure for his contemplative nuns much stricter than that of any other Order at that time, but even they could obtain permission to go outside the monastery when it was necessary.¹ From various sources, particularly the lives of saintly Sisters, it is obvious that the members of the Third Order Conventual considered it part of their work to visit the sick and poor, and even to nurse the plague-stricken in rooms set apart in their monasteries.

The emphasis laid on the fact that Blessed Emily and her Sisters devoted themselves to the education of young girls makes us realise that this education was something more than that given in the existing monasteries in the 13th century. Blessed Emily was face to face with an urgent need of her age.

At least three times in Christian history, before our own day, women have agitated for equal education with men. Charlemagne recognised the right of girls as well as boys to frequent his famous schools. Four centuries later the rise of the great universities stirred up a great wave of enthusiasm for learning which affected women as well as men. Later the Renaissance with its revival of classical learning was welcomed even in the cloister. We have, for instance, a petition from the Dominican nuns of Dartford to the Master General for permission to have masters to teach them in the Speak-Room.

Blessed Emily started her school at Vercelli in the midst of the second period I have mentioned. And be it noted that the girls pre-

¹ E.g. St Agnes of Montepulciano was granted leave by the Master General to go out of the enclosure for the sake of her health. Even a Provincial had power to give this leave but nowadays recourse must be had to the Holy See.

pared in such schools as hers went to the universities not only to learn but to become professors. At times this was somewhat inconvenient, as in the case of Maria di Novella who taught mathematics at Bologna. She was so beautiful it was considered that her male audience would be distracted from the subject on hand and she lectured from behind a curtain! At Alcalá and at Salamanca there were also women professors and women studied and lectured in the medical schools of Salerno. After the unfortunate incident of Abelard and Heloise Paris closed her doors to women and Oxford followed her example.

Mother Anna-Mechtilda Fuazza, Prioress of the monastery of St Margaret in 1652, wrote a life of the Mother Foundress, taking her information from original MSS preserved in the monastic archives as well as from the traditions handed down in the community, but like all hagiographers of the time she is more concerned with relating edifying and extraordinary facts than in giving us any idea of Blessed Emily as an educator. Nevertheless we catch the glimpse of a very lovable and motherly woman, a fine, if, at times, a somewhat stern religious, and a kindly and saintly soul.

Being only eighteen years old at the time the monastery was founded by her father Blessed Emily was not, as so often the case in such circumstances, its first superior. She learnt to obey before she was called upon to command, and obedience together with purity of intention, was the outstanding characteristic of her spiritual life. She was never tired of preaching obedience to her daughters, repeating over and over again that without submission of will and true self-abnegation the spiritual life was a farce. Her own obedience to her confessor, Father Pietro-Maria Beccaria, O.P., was wholehearted and unquestioning. Her spiritual life and the doctrine she taught those under her government were alike founded on the liturgy of the Church and the Holy Scriptures. Her favourite psalm was the 118th, which she continually used for her meditations and instructions. The other outstanding characteristic of her spiritual life was an attitude of thanksgiving to God. All the benefits bestowed on her community, whether spiritual or temporal, were acknowledged by the singing of the *Te Deum* in choir.

We have the account of a miracle worked by her when a fire broke out in the monastery. The neighbours ran to the assistance of the Sisters as soon as the danger became known, but they called in vain to induce them to open the cloister door. They could hear the Sisters' voices and were indignant at their help being scorned, and said that this time Mother Emily's well-known common sense had failed. She, meanwhile, had gathered the community in choir, and thirty-three

times in honour of our Lord's thirty-three years of life the Sisters recited the verse: *Domine, non secundum peccata nostra facias nobis*. Then the saintly prioress faced the fire and with a large Sign of the Cross instantly extinguished the flames. The indignant crowd outside heard the notes of the *Te Deum* rising to heaven in the darkness and, realising what had happened, melted away.

At another time Blessed Emily was attending one of the Sisters who was dangerously ill and so missed her Communion, for when she was free to go to the chapel she found that Mass was over. She lovingly complained to our Lord and an angel appeared to her and gave her Communion. Immediately the whole community spontaneously stood up and sang the *Te Deum*. Although the Sisters had seen nothing of the extraordinary grace accorded to their Mother their union of heart made them conscious of her great joy.

Blessed Emily Bicchieri died as she had lived, in patience and simplicity and a tender thoughtfulness towards others. Her only anxiety was that she should leave the house she had governed for over fifty years in peace and unity.

She was buried in the church of her monastery and lay there for close on sixty years. But the dangers from the constant wars of those days drove her daughters to take shelter within the city and, hoping one day to return to their original monastery, they did not remove their Mother's body. One night some German mercenaries guarding the city walls noticed a bright light not far away and reported it to the magistrates. It was traced to the monastery of St Margaret and the authorities realising, in those Catholic days, that the light was a sign indicating the resting place of a saint, ordered a solemn translation of Blessed Emily's relics. As the magnificent procession escorting the relics entered the city it was met by the funeral cortège of one Battista di Novella. The widow of the dead man in a sudden burst of confidence prayed the holy prioress to restore her husband to life, promising if she were heard to consecrate two of her daughters to the religious life in Blessed Emily's community. Hardly had she made her petition when the dead man rose upon his bier and joyfully joined the triumphant procession. The two daughters, never questioning their mother's right to dispose of their lives in that way, dutifully entered the convent and became worthy religious. A tablet recording this miracle was to be seen on the walls of the Novella home but during the Thirty Years War the French sacked Vercelli and the Novella Palace was destroyed.

Unlike other Dominican tertiaries, notably of course St Catherine of Siena, Emily Bicchieri took no part in the great events passing around her. The story of her life contains nothing dramatic. She was

the queen of a little kingdom of love where peace and union reigned. She practiced what she taught and was herself the example for the others to follow. She was a true Dominican in her love of the liturgy and her love for souls. She was really 'blessed' because she was one of those meek and gentle ones who possess the earth.

Blessed Emily Bicchieri was beatified by Pope Clement XIV in 1769 and her feast is kept on 19th August.

SOURCES: Archiv: Ord: Rom: Reg: Maj: Gen: Cassette (1481).
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C O R R E S P O N D E N C E

Dear Sir,—May I dare to say that I disagree very strongly almost with every word of your article, 'What is Mysticism?' in the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT for August?

Believing, as you seem to do, that visions and ecstasies form an integral part of Mysticism, you must discard almost the whole sane teaching of St John of the Cross. If you maintain, as you seem to do, that a profound intuition of Union with God is necessary for the Mystical state, you must discard most of what the old Classic writers taught on Mystical Theology.

I maintain that Mysticism is *cognition by pure species*, and I maintain that it begins as soon as the soul enters the Night of the Senses, and is never higher or more pure than when it is most desolate, devoid of sensible experience, and empty of all spiritual phenomena. Visionaries, in so far as they are just visionaries, are Mystics only in a derived sense, for no sensible phenomena can possibly be a proximate means of union with God.

When you say that a Mystic knows the divine mystery because he 'feels' it, you make my hair stand on end. May I refer you to Letter xi of St John of the Cross in the third volume of his works in the edition of Allison Peers? Perhaps one might say that a mystic sometimes feels the divine mystery because he knows it. This is the exact reverse of what you say.

Of course there is some experience; the matter is an extremely delicate and subtle one. Even in times of greatest desolation there is an experience of God's presence, but in such a way as not to lessen