

PATRONESS OF FAILURES

GERARD MEATH, O.P.

ON October 20th, 1946, Marie Thérèse de Soubiran was declared Blessed fifty-seven years after she had died a failure in the eyes of the world and of her fellow christians. She was another Jeanne d'Arc in whom holiness looked like madness or stupidity and very unlike wholesomeness. Yet she had promised to be the most conventional of saints with breviary lessons written according to the book: she came of a comfortably placed French family with long traditions of piety and priests and nuns in the ancestral role; she was precocious in holiness and at the age of ten was put to direct the retreat of a young woman of twenty. Of the two the ten-year-old found it the greater humiliation. Her new foundation developed unobtrusively out of the sodality organised by her uncle, Canon de Soubiran, and at the age of twenty-one she was the first Superior of the first regular community. Yet though the congregation grew steadily and Marie Thérèse duly became Superior General, by the age of forty she was expelled, never to be vindicated and to die in disgrace. For fifteen years she was to live uprooted and unwanted, and her story on the face of it rendered her so suspect that it was naturally difficult to find another religious order prepared to accept her. Observe that she was still set on serving God in the religious state; a nun of anything less than heroic goodness might without infidelity have accepted the expulsion as a charter of freedom entitling her to establish a new life in the world. When eventually she did gain admittance to Notre Dame de la Charité it was only to be expected that she should be regarded with suspicion and in time ostracised; her influence on other nuns, especially the young, could only be considered dangerous. It is not difficult to imagine the problem presented by her presence in the noviciate, and she must make another noviciate whether she was an ex-Superior General or not. So the nuns found themselves, with the best intentions in the world, edging her out from

community life. She had already been effectively cut off from the members of her own foundation and only allowed to hear how her ideals were being smashed. Now she became a moral leper whom everyone would willingly try to save dare they risk the contamination of her presence. She was not insensitive to the pain of this isolation, for she wrote: 'It is difficult not to be allowed to devote myself, to have nobody's trust'. But she was a foundress who had failed and the only work that could safely be entrusted to her was answering the door, dusting and darning socks. And this was the doing not of wicked people but of good people albeit influenced by the intrigues of a forceful lunatic; for her successor Mother Mary Francis, who had manoeuvred the abdication, was a maniac who had been married before entering the convent. She had deserted her husband, made herself proficient in theology (she wrote two spiritual books) and entered Marie Auxiliatrice in pursuit of power. But these facts only came to light when she had deserted the congregation after Marie Thérèse's death. During her lifetime Marie Thérèse was a failure and suspicion pursued her to the moment of death. When she had made her last confession it was noticed that she was serene and happy, so her superior, good conscientious woman, suggested that she had a false conscience and should change her confessor. It is an astonishing story of holiness where God took away everything but himself.

Nevertheless it is difficult to deny the idea that Marie Thérèse understood more than we do about the fruitfulness of her life. The understanding did not alleviate her pain and darkness, but by becoming herself a dispossessed person she was throwing down a deep root from which her congregation would draw their peculiar capacity for cherishing the dispossessed. For this among others is the most characteristic work of the *Maisons de Famille* of the Congregation of Marie Auxiliatrice. The houses founded in Toulouse, Amiens, Lyons and Paris provided more than shelter for young women of what we now call the professional classes; they were, as their name indicated, a home from which these young women would eventually go out to found their own homes. Since the foundation of the congregation this work

has grown even more important, and it is much to be regretted that the English hostel at Bow was destroyed in the air raids. This work tackled one of the most serious problems of modern society and Marie Thérèse must have looked far ahead, and to do so the founder herself had to become a problem child. There is just a hint that Marie Thérèse understood what her life meant, because in spite of the complete darkness that flooded the last fifteen years of her life she remained unshakable in her confidence that her foundation would spring into vigorous life within a year of her death.

At the same time Marie Thérèse's family does not stop at the doors of the convent; she remains in a unique way patroness of many modern men and women. We shall not be surprised if her life reminds us of Poles, Roumanians, Serbs and all those people whom we call displaced persons. I once knew a priest from Eastern Europe and was with him on the day he was told that his father had been shot by the communists, that his mother had gone out of her mind and that his brother had joined the communist party. He told me that day that what he felt most acutely was the utter futility of life; that feeling swamped all desire for revenge or pity for his parents and all other feeling, and it was possible as it sometimes is in human relationships to sense and share this with him. Humanly speaking there was nothing for him to live for; he was no longer young and the work of a lifetime (he had been in politics in his own country) was destroyed for ever. There are many such people in Europe today and no amount of 'pi-talk' will fill the emptiness of their lives, but that fact of Marie Thérèse, a futile woman proved another Christ, may help them to realise that no life is wasted.

Futile or not, Marie Thérèse possessed a shrewd human and religious insight and she planned for her nuns to live the double life of prayer flowing into action; for this purpose daily exposition of the Blessed Sacrament was one of the earliest customs of her convents. The endless energy needed for work among the dispossessed could only be stored during the hours of silent prayer, and this would also prove an attraction for many young people—the double

life of contemplation and action dedicated both to God and man. Here again we find ourselves back at the centre of Marie Thérèse's life; her secret is not boundless energy or even boundless love of mankind. She and her nuns are not dedicated to works of charity or even to adoration of the Blessed Sacrament but to redeeming with Christ a dispossessed and futile world by their own dispossession. Marie Thérèse remains a patron of modern Europe when great men are few, failures frequent and futility threatens all. Strength and a clear head are reflected in her eyes when, even though blinded by bitter sorrow, she could still see victory in the grave because it was the grave of Christ.



POINTS OF VIEW

THE MAN IN THE STREET

YOUR Editorial in the January issue indicates that you now intend to take the hand of the man in the street and to show him the way into and through the Life of the Spirit. This is good news. I would not quarrel exactly, but complain about the new style of lettering on the cover; because a number of people reject what they consider to be 'arty-ness and crafty-ness'. These people suffer from the 'closed mind' mentioned by the Editor of last December's *Christian Democrat*. If the lettering were to be bold and simple (like Gill's sans-serif lettering on London's Underground) I am sure the sceptical post-Christian would be more likely to pick up, and possibly to read, your review.

Referring to Mr McWalter's 'Point of View', I do not agree with him when he says the Church is out of touch with the man in the street. The Church is, as always, the guide for all men to the way of salvation. She is here, there and everywhere, for all to see, for all to enter. It is the man in the street who is out of touch, who has fallen away, who is distracted by the noise and bustle of his material life and who does not enter. And why? Because we, members of the