

## SIMPLICITY AMID SOPHISTICATION

---

JOHN THOMAS FORD, O.P.

What soul soe'er in any language, can  
Speak Heaven like hers is my soul's countryman.



THESE few lines penned by a seventeenth-century Catholic poet, Richard Crashaw, significantly expresses the universality of Catholic spirituality. His work little known today, was a genuine contribution to English poetry of his time for it was both "Catholic and catholic."<sup>1</sup> Crashaw, a convert to the faith, found inspiration in the principles and devotions of the Catholic religion. The fruit of this inspiration is an achievement unfettered by the limitations of any single culture or society; it was deeply influenced by the ancient classics and by Spanish and Italian literature.

In the ancient religion whose praises he sings Crashaw appreciates one of its most remarkable characteristics,—its adaptability to all times, to all countries and to every class of society. National boundaries are unknown to the Church in her glorious mission of leading souls to their one true country. Today as in past ages she throws open her arms to all men, be they white, black or yellow, rulers or subjects, master or slave, rich or poor. In her embrace not only a select few but all may find a holy peace and true freedom. In attaining this peace and freedom they do no violence to their manner of life. A peasant of the Middle Ages could be a happy, hard-working peasant and a fervent Catholic; an American Indian on embracing Catholicism need not cease to be a good Indian. A professional man of our own day finds a wonderful harmony between the duties of his professional life and those of his religious life.

Just as Catholicism is perfectly adapted to all conditions of life it transcends even more completely provincialism and nationalism. One can not associate the religion of the languid, pleasure-loving Mohammedan with the life of a hardy Eskimo. The imaginative, esoteric religions of the East have but little

---

<sup>1</sup> Brother Leo, F.S.C., *English Literature*, p. 267.

appeal to the solidly practical mind of the average Englishman. The stern inflexible Protestantism of northern Scotland might have been adapted in some measure to the seventeenth-century Scot: to an emotional Italian or a vivacious Spaniard such a religion would be most disagreeable. Yet people of all minds, Latin, Slavic, Teutonic, Oriental, find in Catholicism a religion eminently fitted to their native temperaments and cultural background. It is the only religion which all the peoples of the earth may embrace with adequate freedom for the development of their national life and culture.

The universality of the Church is such that it transcends not only national characteristics but forms of government as well. For centuries under her wise direction there have flourished empires, monarchies, and republics. Her supranationalism is well manifested by the fact that she does not depend on any one type of government, on any one national temperament or culture. Yet, so universal is Catholicism that no nation can claim it as exclusively its own.

We need not go far to find examples of this adaptability of Catholic spirituality. It is clearly evidenced in the lives of three children who lived and died in our own times. One of these children lived in France, another in Italy and the third in Spain. All three were alike in their passionate love of God; in a similar way did they all try to be worthy of God's love, by an almost perfect correspondence to His grace. Although they all arrived at the love of God by traveling in the same direction their ways of making the journey identified them as true children of their age, of their own cities, and of their own countries.

Anne de Guigné was born two years before the outbreak of the World War near Annecy in France. She was a proud, strong-willed child and during the first four years of her life was very much intent on having her own way. A marked change took place in her life at the time of her father's death. She was just four years old. How much she understood of death we do not know for the workings of a little child's mind escape our penetration. She did however understand that by death we pass from this world to God. With this in mind she definitely resolved to make herself as pleasing to God as possible. She realized that the best way to please God was to be good; the surest way for her to be good was to obey her mother. She still had the same tenacity of will; her struggle to subdue this will was violent; yet in a short time her victory was complete.

About this time too Anne began to look forward with a passionate desire to that day when she would receive her First Communion. So well was she prepared to receive this Sacrament a year later that a learned priest called in to examine her (she was only five years old) said of her: "I hope you and I may always be as well prepared as this little girl is." The love in her heart at the time of her First Communion grew and grew until it filled her whole life. God had given Anne great graces; He now gave her an opportunity of manifesting how perfect had been her cooperation. She was taken ill in her tenth year and throughout the long months until her death two years later she stayed very close to God. The flower of obedience bloomed so wonderfully in her soul that the very last act of her life was an act of obedience.

Like Saints in the Church throughout the ages Anne's spirituality was in perfect harmony with her national temperament. Her father, true to the traditions of his family, had laid down his life on the fields of battle for his beloved France. Anne inherited his soldierly courage and love for country. She could not give her life for her country but what little she could do, she did willingly and cheerfully.

In many respects the life of another child of our times, Maria of Padua, paralleled that of Anne. To her too God gave but a few short years to scale the rocky heights which lead to sanctity. By nature Maria was proud and dictatorial, intensely sensitive; she would not suffer the least contradiction or opposition to her own will.

Born at Padua in the same year as Anne this extraordinary child did not attain sanctity all at once. But from the very dawn of reason she loved Jesus Christ with a fervor that called down upon her the richest graces from God. By this mighty help of God and with the aid of a truly Christian mother she gradually developed into that sweet, gracious child who faced terrible torment with a courage reminiscent of the virgin martyrs of the early Church. At ten years of age she entered on a siege of suffering which she embraced lovingly for Jesus Christ and bore patiently until her death five years later. Throughout these long years she possessed in her spiritual life that fine balance between contemplation and external activity which characterizes true apostolic zeal. Maria offered every suffering for the salvation of souls praying the while for the grace to abandon herself completely to the divine will. By the wonderful action of

grace her strong resolute personality underwent a great change—another verification of the principle that grace does not destroy but rather perfects nature. In this age of physical softness and moral weakness, by her patience and cheerfulness she exposed the true spiritual doctrine on suffering, and indeed very acute suffering, which ended only with death in June 1927.

Maria was a child of modern times. She lived to see the New Italy rise in the feverish activity of the years following the World War. While this Italian child never expressed her love of country in the glowing terms of Anne de Guigné she undoubtedly loved Italy. Confidentially, as if telling a secret, in a letter she reluctantly admits that one of the greatest trials of her illness is the necessity of remaining far from her "beloved Padua." Maria was true to the finest Italian traditions and to those of Padua, that Christian city which has sheltered so many of God's elect.

Antonito Herrera was born at Santander in Spain in August 1920. In the few brief years of life allotted to him he attained a degree of sanctity usually reserved for those who spend a long lifetime making themselves fit subjects to appear before God. There is a marked resemblance between Antonito and Maria of Padua; to quote his biographer: "both had a proud, imperious and impetuous nature to conquer and both conquered it by the grace of God. Neither found the task of self-conquest easy, but they both persevered, and confident not in themselves but in God in a short while accomplished much, for they gained the most glorious victory of all, the victory over themselves."

Yet they were not entirely alike in the manner by which each strove for perfection. Maria sanctified herself through suffering; Antonito by a very systematic process tried to eradicate his imperfections. Gifted with a keen intellect he soon realized that these faults kept him from his beloved Jesus. Very well then, they must go! Anger, pride, envy and avarice (this last was stubborn) each was attacked in turn and each was displaced by its opposing virtue. Neither pride nor presumption prompted him to say: "We can pass over anger and revenge because I have overcome these sins," or "of the seven deadly sins I have only avarice." He is simply stating facts; so complete was his confidence in God's grace that he did not even fear their return. And as a matter of fact his acceptance was so perfect that a fault once driven out did not return. By the time of his death Antonito had overcome in his simple and direct

way the last of his deliberate faults, that of avarice (if a desire in one so young to save small sums of money may be called avarice). This eight year old Spanish boy did not undergo the terrific suffering of his companion in Christ, Maria of Padua. Yet in his last illness he too offered every trial and pain to Jesus whom he had grown to love with that passionate ardor peculiar to his race.

There are traces of his high strung, imperious Spanish nature all through his life. In addition, we find that he demanded that those whom he helped spare no pains in their efforts toward a greater love of God. When chided by his father about his apparent timidity Antonito promptly replied that this timidity would vanish in the face of duty. "If Spain should go to war I would defend my country and with the help of God I should be able to do like David who alone killed the giant Goliath." What a complete realization of his duties did this boy possess, of course of his unique duties to God, but also of his duties to his fellowman and his countryman.

All three children were very much alike but each manifested individual and national characteristics. Christ was the common Father of them all, but in their childlike fervor and simplicity each went to Him in a different way. Anne's life was a model of obedience; Maria's love stood the crucial test of suffering; Antonito set out, seriously and with determination, to root out every trace of imperfection. Anne de Guigné loved France with the love of a true patriot. Maria of Padua could not be entirely happy away from her native city. Antonito Herrera was willing to defend Spain with his life.

Here is a living example in our own times of that beauty in Catholicism of which the poet Crashaw sang three hundred years ago. All nations can look to the Church as their mother; not one of them can lay claim to being her only child. Catholic spirituality is a flower native to no one soil; it flourishes alike under the blazing sun of the tropics and in the atmosphere of the icy wastes of the poles. We come upon this flower everywhere and at all seasons, tinted differently here and there yet always vigorously and beautifully the same.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A Benedictine Nun of Stanbrook, *Anne*.  
Benedict Williamson, *Maria of Padua*.  
Benedict Williamson, *Antonito*.