

of the Laity' and 'liturgical renewal', but by bringing the truths such words express into action in the liturgy and, concurrently, into some kind of consciousness and understanding in our minds. And in doing so we have to reckon on even our intelligent laymen being cheated by outworn and insufficiently-explained phrases from penetrating to the truths beneath.

The material of Jungmann's book is too unwieldy and too disparate to be an ideal tool in most English hands to assist this process. But any reader of this journal who does not contrive to read its first and third Parts will be the poorer.

Blessed John Columbini

SISTER FELICITY, P.C.C.

Very few women can claim to have converted their husbands by being late with dinner but Biagia Ceretani, the wife of John Columbini, is one of them. John Columbini was born in Siena about 1304, and at the time of his marriage was a successful merchant. He was, it seems, intent only on increasing his worldly goods, ambitious, close-fisted and choleric. His biographers say that he gave way to bad temper without scruple though there is no evidence that he did anything more violent than 'turn the air blue'.

One day he came home after a busy morning, tired and hungry, to an unlaid table and a meal half-prepared. Very naturally he 'blew his top' as the saying goes. Biagia, hoping to distract him, thrust a volume of saints' lives upon him and more naturally still, her husband flung it on the floor. It is surprising that he did not throw it at his wife's head. I suspect that Biagia was perhaps an irritating woman who had never lost her temper in her life, but was the proximate cause of many other people losing theirs, her husband included. It is possible that Columbini's lack of scruple regarding his bad temper existed only in Biagia's mind. Be that as it may, on this occasion John Columbini was ashamed of his outburst, picked up the book and began to read the *Life of St*

Mary of Egypt. He became so deeply immersed in the story of this woman who lived alone in the desert doing penance for her sins that he forgot all about his dinner. It was now his wife's turn to wait, but to her everlasting credit she refrained from saying: 'All this fuss about food and now you let it get cold while your head's stuck in a book'.

If Biagia was gratified at the result of her not very tactful action, she was quite unprepared for what followed. It was one thing to have a suddenly manageable husband to deal with and quite another to be married to a man who was going in for holiness in a big way. Conversion certainly, prayer and penitential exercises by all means; even the sale of clothes and furniture and the money given to the poor she could approve. But when her husband brought in so many sick, destitute and verminous outcasts that the house began to resemble a hospital, Biagia was tempted to wish she had not been quite so heaven-storming in her supplications for his soul's health.

Columbini's friends and relations and business associates were agog at the extraordinary change which had come over the hard-headed loud-voiced merchant, and when he bought goods and overpaid and sold them for less than their value they doubtless began to raise their eyebrows and tap their foreheads significantly. When he brought home a leper in the worst stages of decomposition and tended to him until he could be removed, Donna Biagia was moved to remonstrate with her husband for this imprudence which, as she made quite clear, was only one among many. The leper was said to have disappeared miraculously leaving behind him not the fetid smell of his disease but a fragrance which could only be described as heavenly.

If this was true it did very little to change the good wife's attitude and she continued to protest at what she considered her husband's extravagance. 'Well, well,' said John, 'you prayed to God that I might become charitable and good and now you are annoyed because I make a little amends for my avarice and other sins'. He might well have added the explosive and profound comment uttered by many another husband: 'Women!' 'I prayed for rain', answered his wife ruefully, 'but this is a flood'. She spoke more truly than she knew for it was the floodtide of the love of God, and she could no more stem it than a leaf can dam a torrent. Her little bleats of protest and her martyred patience were alike drowned in the roaring cataract which was the answer to her prayer.

Poor Biagia, in her middle age with her son dead and her daughter in a convent and her husband unaccountably turned into a saint! She

was a good pious woman, utterly baffled by a holiness outside her own conceptions and quite unable to keep pace with her husband. Was she perhaps a little sorry that he was no longer the bear with the sore head whose bad temper gave her an opportunity to exercise a certain patronizing forbearance?

Whether she was or not, after a few years she agreed to let him go his way, whereupon he divided his fortune between a convent, a confraternity of women and a hospital; made ample provision for his wife's maintenance and proceeded to devote himself to work in the hospitals, to prayer and penance. Very soon he was joined by other men and together they went about Siena exhorting all and sundry to repentance and renewed fervour in God's service. When members of rich and influential families began to join the band, however, the city fathers became alarmed, possibly fearing a consequent dearth of young men to engage in trade and battle, and John Columbini was banished.

Together with his followers he went to many of the places so often visited by St Francis of Assisi: Arezzo, Citta di Castello, Viterbo. It was here in Viterbo that the brethren received the nickname 'Jesuats' because of their devotion to the Holy Name and their customary salutation 'Praised be Jesus Christ'. Many were the conversions they effected, the disputes they settled, the reputations they restored. John was urged now to seek ecclesiastical approbation for his work but he had never envisaged himself as the founder of an Order or Congregation and when the Bishop of Citta di Castello said he was doing nothing irregular John did not trouble to pursue the matter further.

In 1367 Urban V passed through Viterbo on his way back from Avignon. John and his followers went out to meet him and begged an audience. Crowned with flowers and bearing olive branches and fluttering with rags they must have presented an odd sight and though the Pope was favourably impressed it is small wonder that he asked Cardinal William Sudre and others to examine them regarding their tenets and work. The early fourteenth century had a sharp nose for heresy and the 'Jesuats' were suspected of being influenced by the Fraticelli, those misguided men who roared round the countryside imagining themselves more Franciscan than St Francis.

From the charge of heresy, however, John and his brothers were acquitted and the Pope approved them as a new religious congregation with the title of Apostolic Clerics of St Jerome because of John's devotion to that saint—renowned among other qualities for his bad temper. In spite of this title the congregation was to be an institute of

lay-brothers, living a life of much physical austerity and devoted to the care of the sick and the burial of the dead in the surrounding towns and villages.

Just four days later the founder of this new congregation which had sprung into life spontaneously and received papal approval unsought was taken ill by the Lake of Bolsena. The Last Sacraments were administered and the brothers tried to move John Columbini back to Siena but he died on the way. In the presence of his wife and his spiritual children he was buried at the convent of Santa Bonda where his daughter had died and which he is said to have restored to regular observance by his influence. His Congregation flourished for a time and then declined, being suppressed for lack of numbers by Clement IX in 1668.

I imagine John Columbini would be more surprised that his work had continued for three hundred years than distressed at its dissolution. For after all he had only set out 'to make amends for his avarice and other sins' and if Biagia Ceretani had been prompt with his dinner he would probably have died unwept of apoplexy.