

MARY OF ÁGREDA

S.M.M.

MARY of Ágreða is an outstanding figure in Spanish history of the seventeenth century and her writings have had a strong, though often unrecognized, influence on the trend of Catholic spirituality for nearly three hundred years. It is not surprising that Faber, with his genius for foreign importation, should have drawn freely on this Spanish mystic; it is more unexpected to meet with Manning's praise. In one of his sermons on the Sacred Heart he says: 'The Ven. Mary of Ágreða, in a profuse and minute exposition, has taught us the mystery of the deified humanity and the actions and passion of our Blessed Lord. No human genius could have conceived such teaching.'¹ Such unstinted praise coming from this source may well arouse the curiosity of those to whom *La Mística Ciudad de Dios* is as yet unknown. Those who have not access to the original Spanish will be grateful to Físcar Marison for his pleasing and accurate rendering into the English tongue. The American publishers are to be congratulated on their well-finished and serviceable reprint.²

Mary of Ágreða was born in the town of Ágreða, near Tarazona in Spain in 1602, and entered religion under unusual circumstances at the age of seventeen. The facts of the case are these: Her mother, Catharine de Arana, had a special vision and revelation commanding her to found a convent. There is nothing extraordinary in that. Many women in various walks of life have visions and revelations; not a few of them are to be found in what are politely termed psychological institutions. What is remarkable about this particular experience is its hundred per cent result. The husband, Francis Coronel, showed himself accommodating and joined his two sons who were already religious in the Franciscan Order. Catharine was thus left free to make a foundation of discalced Franciscan nuns in her own house. This was done on the octave of the Epiphany, 13th January, 1619, and the convent was placed under the patronage of the Immaculate Conception. Catharine and her two daughters received the religious habit on the same day. On February 2nd of the following year Mary and her mother took their vows, the profession of the younger girl being delayed on account of her youth. The parents, sons and daughters all persevered in the religious state and each of these chosen souls was remarkable for virtue. Set in the framework of such an exemplary family, Mary's bent would be towards sanctity or sin; the stage was not set for a show of mediocrity. Eight years after the foundation Mary was elected Abbess. She had

1. Glories of the Sacred Heart (4th Ed. Sermon IV, p. 116).

2. *City of God*. Corcoran Pub. Co., Wheeling, W. Va., U.S.A. Price \$24.

not completed her twenty-fifth year and was greatly troubled at her advancement to this exalted rank. In spite of her own contrary opinion, it is evident that she was not wanting in courage, not out to shirk irksome duty; her deep sense of responsibility was partly the cause of her fear. When authority bore down on her dread of authority, she settled quietly to her job and ruled the community wisely and well for nearly forty years. It would be interesting to trace out the spiritual and natural development of Mary of Ágreda's character during those long years of cloistered life, but difficult to do her justice in insufficient time and space. Very unlike St Teresa of Avila in some respects, she resembles her great fellow-countrywoman in others; notably in the nobility of her aspirations and in her generous and energetic responsiveness to grace. For the present we must consider her in connection with the revelations which, though not essential to her sanctity, were the cause of her widespread fame.

When the young Abbess first shouldered the cross of authority, she probably thought that that was the heaviest burden she could be asked to bear; but she did not foresee what lay before her. Not only would she be called upon to cope with the ordinary difficulties of a religious superior very young in years; she would also have to take the strain of having an extraordinary supernatural element in the background of her life. Anyone who labours under illusion with regard to such things, should read the pages in which Mary of Ágreda herself describes the spiritual and physical sufferings she had to undergo.

For about ten years after her election as Abbess she resisted a strong interior urge to record in writing certain revelations made to her about the Mother of God. She felt herself to be utterly unworthy of such an undertaking and only the positive commands of her superiors finally obliged her to comply. *La Mística Ciudad de Dios* was begun in 1637, finished in 1645 and then burnt. And this is how the destruction of so much labour came about:

In the temporary absence of her ordinary confessor and director, an outside confessor ministered to Mary's spiritual needs. When he learned that she had written certain revelations, he told her that women should not write in the Church and ordered her to destroy the document at once. Never did any nun obey with more alacrity. The Mother Abbess made a secret expedition to the back of the monastery and consigned her precious MS. to the kitchen stove. History does not tell us whether the confessor got away with it, but all the big guns were turned on his obedient penitent and she found herself threatened with ecclesiastical censures if she failed to reproduce her work. In other words, she was sentenced to ten years' hard labour, with no option or commutation of any kind. There was some delay, the reason for which is unrecorded,

and then, on 8th December, 1655, she began to write again. This second writing was more extensive than the first. It included a set of Spiritual Exercises for nuns in retreat and the Laws of the Spouse, both of which are to be found in the more or less complete edition of Mary of Ágreda's works published by Gili of Barcelona in 1915-16.

Mary of Ágreda finished her writing in 1665 and her death in the same year is surely no cause for surprise. As she was scrupulously exact in carrying out all the duties of her office, generous in taking a share in the humbler work of the house and most devoted in caring for those in ill-health, her writing must often have been done when the other nuns were abed. Though not called to a martyrdom of blood, she certainly suffered a martyrdom in ink—with no fountain-pen and no typewriter to aid her.

Since Mary of Ágreda's death, the *Ciudad* has passed through more than sixty editions in various languages and even those who are prejudiced against such revelations must admit that it is a very remarkable book. It gives us a helpful presentation of the life of the Mother of God and it is of great interest because of the light it throws on the development of Mariology up to the present day.³ One of the outstanding features of twentieth-century Marian devotion is its solid doctrinal basis and we find that basic doctrine expressed with clearness and precision throughout the book, even where it is embedded in a wealth of detail that is pleasing and colourful, but which the faithful are under no obligation to accept as gospel truth. Mary of Ágreda accepted the scientific findings current in her time. That these are now out of date in no way detracts from the spiritual value of her book. Much of the teaching in the *Ciudad* is of a kind that the modern world refuses to stomach; it is none the less true on that account.

The glimpses that we catch of Mary of Ágreda herself in the pages of the *Ciudad* are rare but illuminating. She is naturally reserved and independent, inclined to resent intrusion upon the intimacy of her hidden life with God. She is endowed with that native stubbornness which we see in St Bernadette and others of our Lady's favoured children. Rightly handled, it becomes that tenacity of purpose that is a great aid to constancy and perseverance in the pursuit of perfection; left to grow wild, it degenerates into sheer obstinacy and weakens the will. Mary of Ágreda had a remarkably good headpiece for a woman, as is shown by her relations with Philip IV of Spain and other great ones of the earth who sought her counsel; but her chief battle-ground was in the region of the will. There, with our Lady's help, she gained the victory and became a shining example of obedience—*usque ad mortem*.

3. The reader is referred to R. Laurentin's article: 'Le Mouvement Mariologique', which appeared in *La Vie Spirituelle*, Feb. 1952.

Hers was no blind, weak-willed obedience; it was as clear-sighted as it was wholehearted and closely patterned on that of the Mother of God. The most telling lesson that Mary of Ágrede's life offers to our age is this—perfect submission in all that is not sin. She herself tells us that obedience was the North Star that guided her safely over the deep waters of extraordinary supernatural experience and her unflinching consolation in times of darkness and distress.

Probably no woman ever entered the field of literature more unwillingly than did this Franciscan Abbess of seventeenth-century Spain; few have succeeded in causing so great a stir. It is a pity that some compilers of works of reference have not gone beyond the controversy of the late eighteenth century for their information. Much water has flowed under the bridges since those days and we now know that many misunderstandings were due to a faulty translation, as well as to the misrepresentations of those with a Jansenistic bias. In recent times there has been a revival of interest in the correspondence between Philip IV and Mary of Ágrede and both Spanish and French editions of the letters have appeared.⁴ Perhaps someone will be found to make these documents accessible in a reliable English translation. We may also hope for a life of the valiant woman whose body lies incorrupt in her native town of Ágrede, while her spirit still lives on in the daughters of St Francis who follow their great Abbess in her Marian way.

4. In Spanish by Torrente Ballester, 1942; in French by R. Bouvier, 1939.



REVIEWS

THE FAILING WINE. By Father M. Oliver, o.c.s.o. (Gill; 12s. 6d.)

For discriminating spiritual-readers a book about our Lady by Father Oliver is something of an event. He always has something to say, and one feels a safe theology under one's feet. In *Fair as the Moon* he gave us the result of his meditations upon our Lady 'not in the clouds but living her life among ordinary men and women'. It was a sublime book because a reverent reflective mind, on such a theme, could not make a picture of Mary as an ordinary person, no matter how ordinary her surroundings.

This time Father Oliver has meditated upon the hidden life, the thirty years before our Lord began his public ministry. That ministry begins with a startling miracle. Our Lady's prayer at Cana ushers it in. In those few words, 'They have no wine', are contained the faith and confidence of Mary as developed, intensified, by thirty years of divine motherhood. All that they contain cannot be sketched without a long