

THE PENITENT :  
 BLESSED ANGELA DE FOLIGNO

BY

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**B**LESSED ANGELA OF FOLIGNO, born about 1249, lived a very worldly and culpable life till she was about forty years old. Then she was suddenly converted—in what way we do not know—became a tertiary of St Francis, and was apparently almost from the beginning favoured with high graces. From that time onwards her mystical life is richly documented owing to the care of her confessor, who wrote down in Latin what she dictated to him in the vernacular. Her life seems truly an illustration of St Bonaventure's saying that God takes not into account what a man has once been—his grace can raise even the greatest sinner to the heights of the mystical life, provided he responds to the divine call with sufficient generosity.

There is, however, a mark which ordinarily distinguishes the mystic who is a penitent from the one who has never lost his baptismal innocence. It is a certain violence with which he turns against his natural instincts, an unmeasured hatred of the old self which will often—as in Angela's case—lead to embarrassing scenes and retard the progress of calm and serenity that usually accompanies the development of the mystical life. On the other hand the mystics who are penitents will teach us the meaning of real penitence with more force and conviction than any other men, because only in mystical contemplation is the soul given the full knowledge of the heinousness of sin, which she sees in the light of divine Love manifested in the Cross.

In a penetrating analysis Blessed Angela traces the 'Twenty Steps of Penitence' by which she herself was led into the way of sanctity. After the first imperfect knowledge and confession of sin, she makes full satisfaction, realises the divine mercy, and begins to be 'illumined'. This illumination plunges her into deep grief, her desire for penance is increased, and she enters on the dolorous way of self-knowledge, seeing 'nothing in herself save faults'. Then she receives a 'certain illumination of grace, in which I was given a profound knowledge of all sins. And in this illumination I saw that I had offended all creatures that were made for me, and my sins were poignantly recalled to my memory. . . . And then it was granted to me to pray with great ardour of love'.

These are the two main factors of all true penitence: knowledge

of self and love of God; without the one penitence would be an empty formality, without the other it would turn into despair. Out of the bitter root of penance and shame springs the sweet flower of love, which soon finds abundant nourishment in the Cross. And the first fruit of this flower, which makes her feel that she herself has crucified her Lord, is the vow of chastity, from which her nature shrinks, 'for on the one hand I was afraid to promise, and on the other the fire of love compelled me to promise, and I could not do otherwise'.

I could not do otherwise. . . . Does this mean that she was no longer free to refuse the invitation of grace? It is a common element in all great conversions that there comes a moment when the soul feels herself constrained to follow the attraction of grace which seems irresistible, though she is at the same time conscious of her freedom to reject it. When theologians speak of 'prevenient grace' and 'physical premotion', these terms may sound abstruse—but to an Angela de Foligno they would only be the theological interpretation of a lived experience, and it is not without significance that these conceptions are precisely the elaboration of the teaching of the greatest converts of the Church, St Paul and St Augustine.

After the gift of her chastity the work of grace becomes even more evident. 'And I was to seek the way of the Cross and to give my heart to Christ, and to go by a thorny road, that is, by tribulation.' But she could not follow this call while she was living with her husband, her mother and children, who had claims on her. Therefore she did what will probably cause scandal to many: she began to pray for their death. And her prayer was heard: one after the other they all died. 'And, because I had started on the way I spoke of before and had asked God that they should die, I received great consolation from their death.'

Shall we turn in horror from this recital, sounding the more revolting to us because it is made in such a bare, matter-of-fact way, as if it were quite an ordinary thing for a mother to pray for the death of her family and to derive consolation from it? We have to admit that to pray for the death of a person who seems to be an obstacle to our spiritual life is wrong under all circumstances except in response to an irresistible divine inspiration—but it may be safely said that this exception is so rare as to be almost unique. The ordinary way with which we meet over and over again in the lives of the saints is that either the obstacles are removed by divine providence without the cooperation or even the desire of the person concerned, or that the apparent obstacle becomes itself a powerful means of sanctification. Yet God is free to accomplish his designs in the way he pleases, and that Angela's prayer was made in response to a

divine inspiration is sufficiently proved by the extraordinary series of deaths that followed it. Nor was it made in harmony with her natural desires. When, a little later, she describes some intense suffering, she writes: 'And to live was even more painful to me than the death of mother and sons (*Et vivere erat mihi poena super dolorem mortis matris et filiorum*)'. Her prayer, then, was made in obedience to the will of God and against her natural feelings, and the 'consolation' she experienced when those she loved were taken from her was entirely supernatural: the sweetness often accorded to a soul that has sacrificed all earthly love for her heavenly Spouse.

The ways of the God who spared not his only-begotten Son must necessarily often remain dark to our limited human reason, though we may come nearer to understanding them in this particular case if we reflect that for a woman who had lived in sin for forty years to reach the mystical heights the school of detachment and suffering must needs be far harder than for others. The exceptional demands made on her by God soon showed themselves in the practice of superhuman penance and in the complete renunciation of all worldly possessions, deemed imprudent even by her Franciscan directors, who considered her still too young to go begging. There follows an excellent account of the gradual illumination of the soul. She begins to understand the *Pater Noster*: 'He put into my heart the *Pater Noster*, with a clear understanding of the divine goodness and my own unworthiness; and the individual words were explained to me in my heart . . . and I began to taste something of the divine goodness', which suggests the beginning of contemplative prayer. Her faith, too, is in some way changed, 'so that the faith I had hitherto had seemed as it were dead in comparison'. She is given a new understanding of the Gospels, which fills her with light and love, 'and I began to have constantly, whether waking or sleeping, a divine sweetness in my soul'.

Thus she has arrived at the threshold of the mystical life, in which illumination of the intellect is combined with the powerful attraction of the will to God, expressing itself in a felt 'sweetness', which quickly detaches the soul from all earthly desires. Her prayer becomes more and more intense, until she loses the power of speech, a frequent phenomenon of contemplative prayer and part of the 'so-called ligature'. At last Angela's directors, convinced of the reality of the divine operations in her soul, agree that she may divest herself of all her property. With this act of perfect imitation of her holy father St Francis she has reached the twentieth step of penitence and is ready to enter on the life of union.

This new life is described in a sequence of seven steps. Angela begins with the *revelatio divinae familiaritatis*, the revelation of the

Holy Trinity and of our Lord in the blessed Sacrament, the fundamental doctrines of the inner life of the Godhead and the extension of the Incarnation in the consecrated Host. It cannot be repeated too often that Catholic mysticism is really only lived dogma. The mystics are saturated with the doctrines of the Church, without which their spiritual life would wither and become that vague emotional pantheism that nowadays so often usurps the name of mysticism. As if to leave no doubt of her meaning Angela describes 'the revelation of the divine education through doctrines (*documenta*) perceived by the ear, and through doctrines intelligible only to the taste of the mind (*gustu mentis*)'. Some of these doctrines are further specified—they are precisely those most unpalatable to human pride, viz. 'the revelation of human humiliation and of the divine reformation and acceptance. And in this step is contained how she saw the whole world and all things as something very small and God filling and exceeding all', a vision reminding us of Mother Julian. At last she sees in a rapture (*in raptu mentis*) 'the power of God and the will of God, by which she was satisfied on every question, namely on all those who will be saved and who are saved, and on the damned and the demons . . . and she remained contented . . . but she knew not whether she was then in the body or out of the body'.

Here again we meet the intellectual element which plays so important a part in all authentic mysticism. It is necessary to insist on this intellectual aspect of the mystical life, because its frequent external concomitants so closely resemble a swoon or even a profound coma, and because, moreover, the language of the mystics themselves who speak about divine darkness, ignorance, unknowing, etc., would seem to suggest that ecstasy is a state of unconscious and mental 'blackout', as it were. But all the mystics, from pseudo-Dionysius, or rather from St Paul, onwards, are at one in telling us that what they call 'darkness' is really an excess of light, which appears dark to them only because the human intellect is so weak.

After Angela has been enlightened on the intellectually difficult mysteries of the Faith there follows 'the revelation of the divine union and love', in which she receives light on the deep mysteries of the love of God for man: on the Passion, which causes her an 'excess of love', on the intercession of our Lady for all mankind, and on the blessed Sacrament. After this flood of light and consolation comes a martyrdom of body and soul closely corresponding to the descriptions of St John of the Cross and St Teresa of the Dark Night of the Spirit and the pains suffered before the Transforming Union.

Blessed Angela, the penitent, is being led to the same heights as the virginal Catherine or Teresa. But because she has been raised so

high from the very depths she is constantly afraid of vainglory and pride. The Lord, however, takes good care lest the chosen soul he has delivered from the lust of the flesh should fall into the worse snare of spiritual pride. When the Holy Ghost has just said to her 'Love me, for you are much beloved by me', and she receives ineffable consolation from these divine words, 'then my sins and vices were at once recalled to my memory, and I felt a greater humility than I had ever done before'. For the more closely God unites her to himself, the more clearly is she made to feel her faults, and the more is she afraid lest her mystical experiences should be delusions. This fear, which springs from true humility and knowledge of self, and is one of the surest signs of authentic mysticism, is in Angela's case especially strong because of the sins of her past life and the extraordinary graces she receives. For she is allowed to feel 'the Cross corporeally, and by feeling it, my soul was liquefied in the love of God'. Soon afterwards the consolations our Lord showers on her become so ineffable that she lies motionless for eight days, so that 'during these days I could hardly speak, nor say a *Pater Noster*, nor could I rise'.

Perhaps such a prolonged state of prostration might seem pathological. But even if this were so—and without in any way disparaging these extraordinary states, we may frankly admit that it looks as if there was a pathological streak in Angela de Foligno—this would in no way detract from the authenticity of her mystical experiences, as little as pathological phenomena in a poet or other creative artist detract from the value of his art. A very highly strung emotional and spiritual life may from time to time show the effects of strain, especially in the state of ecstasy, when the body is not yet sufficiently adapted to the impact of extraordinary graces; but these are weaknesses which disappear almost entirely if and when the last stage, the Transforming Union, is reached. For these 'pathological' states are only surface phenomena; if they went deeper, they would affect reason and will. But this is just the fundamental difference between mystics and hysterical persons, that the reason of the former is progressively enlightened, so that even the great ones of this world often seek their advice, and that their will becomes marvellously strong, overcoming all obstacles, whereas the development of the latter is just in the opposite direction.

Shortly after her eight days' rapture Angela received a further increase of graces, which she describes in the second of the Seven Steps. When she wanted to say the *Pater Noster* 'a voice came into my soul saying: You are full of God. And then I felt all the members of my body full of the delight of God . . . and I felt how God embraced my soul'. Yet, however great her joy in this divine familiarity,

her sins come always to her mind, 'and I doubted that such great things should actually be said to me'. So in her distress she asks God for a sign, a precious stone for example—a favour of which she had no doubt read in the lives of the mystics—to convince her that it was truly he who spoke to her. But he tells her that even such a sign would not rid her of her doubts, because she might be deceived in it. But he proposes to give her a better proof: 'And this sign shall be always with you. . . . You shall be burning with the love of God . . . and this love will be so fervent that, if someone says something evil to you, you will hold it to be a favour and will exclaim that you are unworthy of such a grace. And this is the certain sign of the grace of God: for thus have I borne (ignominy) with great humility and patience'.

The sign that God has promised Angela appears in her increased desire for suffering; she now lives to the full the life of contemplation, to which St Bonaventure ascribes the longing for martyrdom. She receives an intellectual vision of a very high order, for she sees God as 'a plenitude, a clarity, through which I felt in myself an indescribable fulness. . . . I can say nothing else but that it was altogether beauty and goodness'. This, of course, does not mean that she has seen the divine Essence, but some of his attributes, beauty and goodness, conveyed in an ineffable impression of plenitude and light. The term 'vision', though generally used in mystical theology even for such principally intellectual experiences, is somewhat misleading, because it gives the general reader the idea of something 'seen' by the eye of the imagination. But such graces are really far more subtle; they are intellectual illuminations in which the imagination plays only a very subordinate part, just sufficient to enable the soul who is still in her earthly body to grasp the truth that is being impressed on the intellect.

The constant interplay of intellectual illumination and the ardour of love, one being increased by the other, is very striking in Angela's writings. So in the next, the Third Step, she rises to even greater heights of charity: 'My heart was lifted up above all earthly things and placed in God, so that I could neither think nor see anything save God. And whether I talked or ate or whatever I did, nothing could prevent my heart from being always in God'. This state of happiness is followed by four weeks of black desolation, when 'I stood in tribulation, and I seemed to feel nothing of God, and it seemed to me that I was, so to speak, forsaken by God'. But after the brief Night is over consolations increase. She feels herself embraced by Christ and enters into his Side—and after these proofs of his love she receives again lights of a very high order: she 'sees' the ineffable power and will of God, 'in which I understood most fully and with

certainly all the things about which I had asked', a knowledge which fills her with such delight that it overflows into the body.

In the Fifth Step she is granted the 'revelation of the divine Union and Love'. Though she describes experiences similar to preceding ones, such as more visions of the divine Essence (as far as it can be 'seen' in this life) and profound ecstasies, it is clear from her accounts that they are of a more exalted nature, and their reality is confirmed by their effects; for her confessor is constrained to express his amazement at her perfect confessions and contrition. She describes very clearly the effects by which she recognises the divine Presence in her soul, speaking of 'a certain unction which suddenly renews the soul and softens the limbs of the body (a mystical experience similar to "liquefaction", in which the love felt by the soul overflows into the body making it soft, as it were, and responsive to the divine action) conforming them to the state of the soul, so that nothing can touch or hurt her'. In this state she has not even tears of joy—it is too exalted for that, for 'God brings with him into the soul such a superabundance of gladness that she has nothing more to ask for'. Her confessor gives an interesting description of her appearance when in this state: 'She became white and red, radiant and joyful, and her eyes so bright that she seemed no longer herself'—a picture the more striking if we remember that she must have been about fifty years old at the time, and weakened by her penances, but which tallies perfectly with descriptions of other mystics, e.g. St Teresa, in a similar state of exultation.

But, exalting as this state is, she has not yet attained to the stability of the Transforming Union; for this she has first to pass through a longer and more painful period of complete darkness than those she had to endure before. Her account of it has an extraordinary freshness and vigour: 'The torments that the soul has to bear from the devils I can liken to nothing else but to a man hung by the neck who, blindfolded and with hands bound behind his back, remains alive, suspended by a rope and in irons, with no expectation of support or help'. And, changing from this corporeal image to the spiritual condition of the soul in this state, she continues: 'All the virtues of the soul are overturned while she herself looks on and knows it'. Even worse, 'all her vices live again; not that they are permanently there, still, they cause much pain; and even those vices which were never there enter the body . . . the soul sees that all strength is taken away from her, and though she does not consent, yet she has no power at all to resist these vices'.

This is the most searching of the trials of the Dark Night of the Spirit, that the soul should appear utterly powerless to resist the storm of evil suggestions and desires raging within her. Actually she

does resist all the time by the very fact that she does not consent, and the more strenuous her resistance, the more painful the trials. The onslaught of the powers of evil seems to come from her own unfathomed depths, and this most painful purification teaches her the nothingness of the creature: Without me you can do nothing.

In this Dark Night 'God is completely shut out and hidden from me, so that I cannot even remember him. . . . Hence, seeing my sins, I fight against these devils with all my strength'. But, being unable to prevail against them, 'I become full of wrath and sadness, bitter and furious', a state which is the more humiliating as the soul afflicted with these temptations has but the one desire to please God—only to find herself in a condition where she appears to herself most displeasing to him. It is only after the turmoil has ceased that she is able to recognise that this 'is the greatest purgation and purification of the soul'.

When it is at last over, Angela the penitent finds herself on the threshold of the Transforming Union described in the Seventh Step. It begins with another vision of God, higher than all the former ones, when she sees him in a darkness, which is darkness only 'because he is a greater good than can be thought or understood . . . and she sees nothing, and she sees all. . . .' As Master Eckhart and so many other mystics she can express the inexpressible only in contradictions. 'And the soul receives a knowledge of God so great that I cannot understand how it comes about', still less can she express it. At the same time she is introduced to the deepest region of the soul, 'where there is neither joy nor sadness nor delectation . . . but where there is all good and all truth. . . .'

Only very few men and women are privileged in this life to attain to the knowledge of their own souls—for this knowledge depends on the knowledge of God. As the soul is made in the image of God, so true knowledge of self is proportionate to knowledge of God, for in the mysterious ground of the soul is mirrored the image of God, 'And I see him who is Being, and how he is the Being of all creatures'. At last she sees herself no longer in herself, but in God; there is an indescribable note of triumph in the words of the sinner whom God has transformed into a saint: 'And I see myself with God wholly pure, wholly sanctified, wholly true, wholly upright . . . and wholly heavenly in him'; and she hears the words: 'In thee rests all the Trinity, all truth, so that you hold me and I hold you'. 'And', she confesses, 'to this state I have been wholly led and elevated by God, for I myself could neither will, nor desire, nor ask for this state. . . . And my soul could not comprehend herself.'

It is a wonderful thing that a woman, who until her fortieth year had been leading a life of sin, should have been raised to these



heights; but the words of truth that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the ninety-nine just have at all times been as valid as on the day when Mary Magdalen washed the feet of her Lord with her tears. But the way from sin to the heights of the spiritual life, how can it be found? Blessed Angela gives the answer of all the mystics: 'I believe that a soul cannot find this divine light more quickly nor more easily than by devout and true and humble and continuous and ardent prayer'. Prayer, this invisible activity of the soul and in the soul, prayer, this mysterious relation between God and man that can be as full of bliss as it can be full of pain, prayer, then, is the way that leads into the Kingdom of Heaven, and that leads there infallibly, whether we start from our baptismal innocence or from a life that has been immersed in sin. But it is a hard way, for, as the life of Blessed Angela shows so clearly, once a soul has started on it she is compelled to divest herself of one attachment after the other. For the God of the mystic is the same as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he is a jealous God. But he takes away all only in order to give all, changing the emptiness of sin into the fulness of grace that is a beginning of eternal life in this sinful world.

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### C O R R E S P O N D E N C E

Dear Sir,

In the article which appears in the current number of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* on St Nicholas von der Flüe, as we must now call him, the writer gives the traditional account of what happened at the Council of Stans. But the life of the holy man which was written and published in Lucerne, in connection with the public celebration of his fifth centenary, stated that this was incorrect. Very careful investigations had shown that he did not abandon his hermitage to go to Stans. What he did was much more remarkable. Perhaps he recalled the case of Eliseus and Naaman. He delivered a message to be carried to the Council, and that message produced a speedy agreement and the eventual establishment of the Swiss Confederation. Being specially interested in St Nicholas, I sent to Switzerland for the book, but unfortunately I have not kept it. A fact which throws light on the attitude of his family towards his retirement from the world is that they belonged to the 'Friends of God', like so many of the most pious Catholics of their time in central and north-west Europe.

Yours faithfully,

NORAH LEESON, T.O.S.D.