

HUMAN AND DIVINE LOVE

BY

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HOOLINESS on the heroic scale is sufficiently rare in itself, or so we believe; in conjunction with a profound and passionate love for a human being we believe it rarer still, almost a contradiction in terms. In our own times one whom, from the standpoint of our colder, more tepid lives, we may well consider a saint, has shown us the ways of sanctity, of active zeal so constant as to constitute heroism, and of human love, all united in a short life. This human and divine lover was Mario Chiri, one of the pioneers of Catholic Action which in Italy has produced an astounding crop of young men and young women of outstanding holiness; Mario Chiri is, humanly speaking, one of the most attractive of them.

Among the ways of Providence which may seem to our presumption least comprehensible is the early dying of men and women whose influence for good we feel has been abruptly extinguished. The simple answer is that death does not end influence; on the contrary it often extends it; the radiation, more or less restricted, may by death become world-wide. 'This is the power', says Fr G. Vann, O.P., in *The Divine Pity*, 'that lives on . . . the original influence is handed on to others and to others again and from generation to generation.'

In the case of Mario Chiri, his influence in his own country was such that it might seem it could not have been greater, but this, of course, cannot have been so or all Italy would be now competing for canonisation. His letters to Lina Cusi, published a few years after his death, could probably not so have impressed his generation had he lived longer—their special point and appeal came from his being of the age of the young men and women who founded their married lives on the model he left them.

Mario Chiri was born on the 26th of October 1883; he died on the 16th of April 1915. 'To produce a Christian state', says the preface to his life by C. Parisi (A.E.V., Rome) 'was then the call to action to which Chiri so marvellously responded in his time'. 'Conditions made the goal seem very far off and the battle to reach it arduous'. Catholic Italy had gone widely astray owing to causes reaching back to the French encyclopedists, the German *Enlightenment* and the consequent growth of free-thought and freemasonry among the leaders, and other secret societies among the people. The faith was

not lost but its open practice in political and governmental circles was unusual and led too often along the road to failure or even dismissal.

Mario Chiri was born and grew up at Pavia, that northern 'city of a hundred towers'. Among the traditions and arts of such Italian churches and palaces his happy childhood and youth were passed. His father, an officer in the Piedmontese army, passed on to his son his integrity and valour but nothing of his robust physical appearance, for as he grew up it was evident that Mario was not growing very tall or anything but thin—a *magrolino*—and so he remained. His mother's was the formative influence; open-minded and intelligent, she taught her three sons from the very first to love their home, their country and, above all and everything, God. She loved her sons almost with passion but never indulged them; their home-life had all the Italian hardiness and was a little austere and they, in consequence, loved it and herself the more. The sons were intelligent; Mario at the age of five, for some domestic reason was sent to day-school and was seated apart on a little bench suited, in the teacher's opinion, to his tender age. An inspector, finding Mario's minute hand the only one raised to answer a question, had the little bench discarded, and Mario joined his elders. But this was a single episode, for otherwise he seems not to have distinguished himself till his University years except for clearness of mind and an ability to express it. But he had always a *will*, a horror of anything mean, shabby or impure and an adamant way of sticking to what he thought right; loose talk or sorry insinuations simply faded out, his fellows said later, when Mario was there. They liked him; one could *count* on Mario, and at school as later, and without any particular good looks, this *magrolino* had a charm no one could explain and few resist.

In due course Mario was entered at his city's University, a famous one founded as long ago as the 14th century by Galeozzo Visconti and where the dust of Columbus is said to rest.

In spite of his delicacy of appearance Mario was as sound of body as of mind, neither intensive study, games, mountain-climbing or the most strenuous fencing-bouts could tire him, he was joyous, open-hearted and apparently carefree, friendly with men and girl graduates alike. Yet to keen Italian wits there was something different about him from the first, something that set him apart, an inner reserve. He never preached—that was the last thing he thought of! yet somehow, in some way, they both said and wrote when he was dead, that they had felt *better* when with him. He was, too, original, made up of many strands; slightly romantic, his bent of mind was also intensely positive; he loved figures and statistics, but poetry at least

as well, for he knew most of the *Divine Comedy* by heart, much of Carducci and some of d'Annunzio. Music he loved with passion; he wanted to be a priest, or, at other times, a musical conductor. His religious ideals and—in that land of violent passion—the restraint and purity of his life were known, but he met with no spite or ridicule—his fellows found in him 'something pure, simple and infinitely great', and even with the most turbulent he was popular. As to the activities of those years, a full biography alone could relate them.

A first success at the Bar, followed by a tour of half Europe—a prize given by the University Catholic Federation—had confirmed the golden opinions he had already won. His former professor, G. Montemartini, then in the Ministry of Labour in Rome, had Mario nominated and attached to his department.

It is difficult, says G. Parisi, to measure what it might then have meant of valour for a young Catholic to take up such a post, 'how difficult but how thrilling' to join a bureaucracy which considered that it alone could deal with the working classes. Mario had fully formed opinions to the contrary, comprehensive views as to what constituted Christian justice and his own synthesis of the burdens it was to remove. For this he was abundantly equipped by his knowledge of sociology, economics and statistics; at that moment at Pavia his study of that city's commerce was appearing, and to this day is considered a mine of documentation and thought. Before long with other comprehensive reports he definitely established his reputation.

In Rome his Apostleship of Catholic Action took form and soon he was recognised by various Catholic bodies as the speaker they were looking for and was called upon in season and out; soon his activity verged on the miraculous. If he possessed a gift for oratory he made no use of it but relied on clarity and reasoning alone to convince his hearers. Unless actually asked to speak, however, he never put himself forward, yet while others might indulge in finer sentiments, it was found that it was he who *did* things. He gave Catholics, says his biographer, the arms which put them politically on a level with their adversaries.

It will be evident that this life of action was supernaturally sustained, for without prayer, daily Communion and his short meditation with their resultant grace Mario would not have retained his outstanding humility and the unflinching charity with which he met the jars and, sometimes, the jealousies and detraction incident to his work, or the cheerful serenity which nothing at any time really disturbed. Anyone as intelligent as Mario would have been aware of the natural powers he possessed for his apostleship and he obviously would wonder whether or not they were to be reinforced by the grace

of the priesthood. On the other hand he knew that he had, so to say, a natural aptitude for marriage, for human affection. He had once to use that iron will of his in order simply to disappear till he had conquered a wayward inclination. So, clear-sighted as he was, he was not going to try and rush into a seminary; he prayed, took advice and waited.

A summer holiday in an enchanted valley brought together his family and that of a charming girl of eighteen, Lina Cusi from Liscate; meeting daily, he and Lina made friends. When the time came for the idyll to end, 'They parted without precise words', says his biographer and friend, but after Mario's death it was found that he had carefully noted the date of that parting; while Lina Cusi has written elsewhere that 'a feeling stronger than themselves' (but not really stronger than Mario) 'had already pushed them towards each other'. They met afterwards at intervals, they even exchanged letters on occasions, they owed to each other their 'friendship', but still Mario went not an inch further. God had still to show him his will; to Lina as to himself he believed that Will was all that truly mattered. Most touchingly, most sublimely indeed, he thought Lina would feel precisely as he did that Eternity would unite them and that earth, when all was said, scarcely counted. . . . He never concealed from her that he would *have* to follow God's will—if only he knew it. Finally he went into retreat at the great monastery at Subiaco. Not long after another radiant summer united a circle of friends at Vezza d'Oglio and there, at long last, the 'friendship' he and Lina knew in their hearts was so much more, achieved its culmination to the delight of two families and many friends known and unknown. From all over Italy congratulations poured in on the champion of Catholic Action. He and Lina were married five months later, on the 8th January, 1912.

But till then there was the waiting. From the first Mario, of course, knew that Lina was good through and through; from the first he had talked quite openly to her of God, of holiness, of his desire to serve God, to save souls. She may have been all along, in some measure at least, of his way of thinking; certain it is that the engagement, or even the friendship, could not have lasted had she been fundamentally different from himself. She must indeed have shared his quality of *difference*, first of all to accept the long uncertainty, and then, when that ended, to accept Mario just as he was. True, she loved him, but that might only have exasperated her; most young girls at such a time expect the limelight to rest exclusively on themselves, to be the one and only thought of their lover, but with Mario that could not be. He contrived in the very first moments of

their engagement to write his Lina letters a confessor might almost have written; and neither to offend nor hurt her, nor even to make her think him a prig, his letters were of such crystalline sincerity and at the same time so much those of a lover. Lina was intelligent but it did not require intelligence to realise that he did *indeed* love her.

There was, then, as we might expect, something very fine in Lina Cusi, something loving and giving, a young yieldingness; apart from that, one guesses, there was something spiritual that matched that in Mario. In the very dawn of their engagement, which might more accurately be described as their impassioned love-story, he wrote to her, 'This morning a thought came to me with clearness, with force, with intensity—Lina too must go to Holy Communion every day. I had to write this to you (he uses the endearing and tender "tu" which in our colder phraseology we do not possess and which partly, I think, made such "confessor" letters possible) 'straight away . . . every day that passes is time wasted in which you miss one consolation, one help. . . . If he were still personally on earth, if he lived near you and you were allowed to go and see him once a day . . . could you give up hurrying every morning for a little to the beloved master, the beloved friend? . . . If, to give an example', he adds with that matter-of-fact candour of his, 'I were not far from you and you could come every day to spend an hour with me, would you refrain because, you might say, you feel me so greatly all day in you, near you?'

Before long, of course, with naïve sincerity, he discovered the demands affection such as theirs makes upon human beings. 'I really did not think that loving anyone so entirely absorbed one's thoughts! As the thought of our Lord is always present to me, so is the thought of you always present'. Soon, too, he was wondering what he had done to deserve this new and astounding happiness; his robust good sense and truthfulness told him and he told her: 'Well, . . . have I not tried in all the years of my youth to feed in my heart the pure love of God? Have I not absolutely trusted myself to God? Forbidding myself even to think of what my life might be, renouncing too, if necessary, human happiness? . . . To all this the good God (*Dio Buono*) has willed to give some merit'.

Another wonder of the engagement was that it never interfered with his zeal for Catholic Action, still less with his spiritual life, yet on the human side his tender and impassioned ardour never lessened. 'Keep as you are', he wrote, 'lovely, lovely indeed! It is a grace of God for which we must be serenely happy. . . . I want you absolutely

good as you are, as you will be; you are beautiful! Let's thank the Lord who has given you this gift as well, *mia bella, mia cara*'. The care he took to keep the same iron grip on himself as before was touching and wonderful. 'How I feel you always near. But . . . quietly, *bambina mia*, with the . . . well, nostalgia for caresses . . . no, that must not be. When we are together again that will be such a consolation to us. But, now absolutely peaceful (*serena*). . . And', he cannot help adding, 'I send you a kiss'.

All his letters have the simplicity of his race, the easy phrasing of matters more northern people will not, or cannot, express; with that simplicity he had the almost brutal Italian truthfulness. 'Do you know what I thought today? That we write each other letters which are always too austere, serious, grave . . .' So they must 'let up a little'. Still they both knew, he adds, how their 'austerity' never embittered or diminished their love—how much the contrary!

When at last they were married their life was almost as ideal as they expected; the only shadow was his occasional evening absences for Catholic Action, or a rarer journey from home on ministry business. 'Oh! God, God bless my Lina', he wrote once, 'bless me too; we want to give you glory, to rise to you by the way you have shown us, the way in which you give, you promise, us such happiness'.

A son, 'Pino', was born to them, and then to their joy another was on the way. On the 24th of February, Pino's first birthday, Lina said that evening, 'One would think our life was too beautiful'. Mario, as if with some sudden presentiment, added that as they then accepted blessings from God, they must be ready to accept the Cross. It was not long in coming.

A month later Mario, after an operation, was at death's door. Outside the clinic anxious friends succeeding each other included those he had so often helped—tram-conductors, boot-blacks, small tradesmen and many others. To the end he kept his extraordinary clearness and a perfect consciousness of what God was asking him to leave. As far as in him lay he said he would still help Catholic Action; his young wife and children, Pino and the unborn one, he committed confidently to God—Lina must do likewise. 'Christ is coming! No, not yet', he said once to her; and later: 'Look, Lina, what light! there in front of me'. He died on the 16th April, 1915.

Today, years later, his life has been written to perpetuate the precise inspiration he was to that generation of generous youth, to perpetuate the record of his human love neither lessened nor divided by the supreme passion of his life, his love of God.