

# THAT THEY MAY BE ONE

BY

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THE tram-car, fuller than any English tram would dare to be, went jangling and clanging through the streets of Rome, out beyond the walls, on the Grottaferrata; we dismounted, directed by eager and friendly voices, near the convent of the Cistercian nuns where we were to be guests. The fact had impressed those whom we had told of our intended visit. 'What! You are going to stay with the *Seplote Vive*? Do they take guests? You're not thinking of taking the veil, are you? How on earth have you managed that?'

To the first two questions we answered 'Yes'; to the third we said 'No'; to the fourth we said that we had an introduction from an Anglican source and that we were sailing openly under our own Anglican colours. The Trappists of Grottaferrata have long shown a special concern for the Prayers for the Unity of the Church, to which the Octave between the feasts of St Peter and St Paul, from January 18th till January 25th, is dedicated, and the very spirit of that Octave seemed to inform the invitation sent us so graciously and cordially to end our holiday in Rome with a few days at the convent guest-house.

One of us knew, intimately and happily, the life of an Order of Anglican Benedictine nuns, and had memories of retreats and quiet holidays in their house on Tweedside. We had both received impressions of the courtesy and friendliness of the religious living in Rome: there was the welcome given us when we climbed the Spanish Steps to Trinita del Monte to find the picture of the *Mater Admirabilis* that is the treasure of the *Soeurs du Sacré Coeur*; there was the friendly '*buon' appetito*' called to us one day when we were beginning our picnic lunch on a by-path near the Appian Way, and a group of scarlet-sashed nuns passed. But neither these brief encounters nor the experience of an active, unenclosed community were a complete preparation for living on the very threshold of holy enclosure and silence. Would it not all be a little austere, almost formidable, withdrawn from the warm world?

It proved, on the contrary, to be an entrance to a world in which we found the very essence and fullness of light and warmth, joy and peace. For two wayfarers it was home-coming. One thought of Hilaire Belloc's poem:—

Of courtesy, it is much less  
 Than courage of heart or holiness,  
 Yet in my walks it seems to me  
 That the grace of God is in courtesy.

That Cistercian courtesy was the fragrance from the holiness, courage and grace that form and maintain the interior life. The Trappist discipline at once demands and fosters them; the silence and austerity of the rule need more than a mild godliness. The heroic virtues grow in that soil. We had known something already of their personification in one daughter of the house: Suor Maria Gabriella. Now we were with those to whom she was a living memory, we could visit her tomb, think of her, picture her in that setting which to her was truly home, the very threshold of Paradise.

The longing for unity, in both the Roman and Anglican Communion, has almost intensified itself into a movement or a mission. It expresses itself in prayer, especially during the Octave; in mutual courtesy, charity, and growth of understanding; and already it has had its martyrs. If we give to that word its original sense of 'witnesses'. Sister Maria Gabriella (her biographer has chosen to give her this little, easy title instead of the 'Mother' that the professed Trappists bear), gave witness to her passionate desire for the Unity that is our Lord's desire, by offering her life for it: already there had been such an oblation made and received in the Community: that of Mother Immaculata.

Suor Maria Gabriella was a Sardinian, of healthy country stock. Her span of life was not wide—from 1914 to 1939; her childhood was lived during the first world war, her death occurring on the eve of that dark night from which we have yet barely emerged. She was a dark, vivid child, not very meek, not always docile. Years later when she was in the novitiate, with every weakness so overcome that the Abbess could not discern a single fault in her, she confessed to impatience as her besetting sin. It was one which, dominated and transformed, can become ardour. She could be wilful too, with a child's faculty for ignoring what she does not choose to hear. Once her mother told her to bring her a basket of potatoes; the small Maria ignored the gentle bidding. It was repeated, more sternly, and again ignored. Then the mother picked up both child and basket in her arms and carried them to the spot to which she had desired the one to bring the other! It was victory for the mother—for the child knew her fault and, like another child who was to become a saint, St Thérèse, was easily ruled by love of her mother.

As a girl she had a passion for novels and romances, and there is another story of her sitting in a corner, lost in her reading, while

the church bell rang for Vespers and Benediction and her mother said, 'The Vesper bell, Maria'. 'Yes, I am coming', said an abstracted voice. A little later, 'I am going, Maria', and the mother went out. Maria did reach the church—in time for Benediction.

Love for her mother did a great deal to subdue her wilfulness; and above and beyond and embracing that human affection was her love for the divine Mother. Shortly before her vocation clearly declared itself she had a dream or vision: that she was in church and saw our Lord standing at the altar, our Lady beside him. He held out his arms in love to Maria; but she ran out of the church crying, 'No, no; I am a sinner'. Then she found our Lady following her, smiling at her as if more pleased by that confession than by any other words she could have spoken.

Her vocation was unmistakable. Her docility was shown from the first by her leaving it entirely to her director to choose the convent for her novitiate. She came to Grottaferrata on 30th September 1935, the feast-day of St Thérèse. There was to be only one brief absence from that beloved home and that was to be part of her oblation, the part most hard to bear.

She was a good novice; her natural faults engulfed by the grace of humility. Every religious must die to self; but that holy mortality may come more swiftly in the Trappist rule than in any other because there is silence, yet no privacy, communal life without conversation, without interchange of thought or experience. There is that other discipline too, the practice of mutual accusation of faults in chapter, which when done in charity can wound, even slay, self, but heal the soul. Suor Maria Gabriella was once blamed for always looking so serious and sad; thereafter she showed the joyfulness that is one of the marks of sanctity. In chapter, then, the silence is broken and there may be some approach to conference; Mother Abbess may give her daughters such news as she thinks it well for them to know. It was thus that Suor Maria Gabriella heard of the urgency of prayer for Unity, of the chain of intercession being forged during every Octave, of the work being done both in Europe and America to bring about the fulfilment of our Lord's desire: 'That they all may be one'.

They all heard of it, they all tended the lamp of prayer; but one was moved to offer even more than her prayers, to offer her very life. She was Mother Immaculata, who was old and frail and who had lived long, like Anna in the Temple, in waiting upon God. It seemed to her now that what was left to her of earthly life was a very little thing to offer; but, if she were permitted, she would make that humble oblation. Meekly she asked permission of Mother Abbess; it was granted her. Like the young novice (with

whom, perhaps, she had never exchanged a spoken word) Mother Immaculata was influenced all her life by a vision of our Lady. Her family was a poor one and as a child she had, like so many little girls in poor homes, to act as nurse to her baby brother. A baby can be very heavy in seven-year-old arms, and seven-year-old patience is not very great. Sometimes she held the baby awkwardly and uncomfortably. Then she thought of the statue of our Lady in church, and how tenderly she held her Baby. But he was a very special Baby. 'If she were to be given *him* to hold—.' She found she was looking at our Lady herself—not at a statue, not in a dream. Our Lady moved, took the baby-brother from the tired little sister's arms and held him so lovingly, so comfortingly, covered his feet. As a mother she knew exactly how babies like to be held. Then she gave him back to the little sister bidding her, 'Hold him carefully; he is mine'. That vision of the divine motherhood was still fresh in the mind of the old religious. She knew that our Lady wanted to have all her children brought together. So she made her oblation and it was received.

Mother Immaculata was suddenly stricken by paralysis. The end of her journey was to be hard; her tired body until the very moment of death was to be a prison. She lay, helpless and speechless, suffering this captivity with infinite patience; able and glad to signify assent when she was asked tenderly, 'Do you offer all this for Unity?'

When she died the story of her oblation was told in chapter. The life of the convent, enclosed, silent, laden with prayer, continued. Mother Immaculata was not forgotten in the hearts or the prayers of her sisters; and by one, Suor Gabriella, she was vividly, almost dramatically, remembered. Suor Gabriella dreamed of her, saw her entering Paradise, young and radiant as a bride. In the cloisters one day she was aware of a perfume of rare flowers, richer than any that could come from the austere surroundings of Trappist life. The perfume came to others too, elsewhere in the house. But it would seem as if it specially impregnated the soul of the one called to follow Mother Immaculata in the way of oblation.

Suor Maria Gabriella, young, vigorous and vivid, with so much of life to offer, desired also to make the oblation of her life. She too, like a good religious, first asked permission; it was given hesitantly and with reluctance; it might be more accurate to say that it was not withheld. But she *was* allowed her choice of setting foot on the dolorous way of suffering and death. For the frail old Mother Immaculata the agony of death had, possibly, lain more in weakness and helplessness than in pain and the awareness of pain; for this young creature it must mean a long struggle, for a

youthful body does not easily yield to mortality, and the disease that came upon her, tuberculosis, can be slow of consummation.

Besides this obvious suffering there was another trial to be endured. Suor Gabriella had been a good and happy novice and was still happier in her profession. The convent was her home; that must be repeated and remembered. She once wrote to her own mother, 'I live, I eat, I sleep under the same roof with Jesus. What more could one desire in this mortal life?' Simplicity and whole-heartedness were at the very roots both of her character and of her vocation; she desired to give herself, like a Host, to be consumed for the glory of God.

She foresaw the dolorous way she must travel, but perhaps she did not quite foresee what was to be her Gethsemane: a period of banishment (for so it was to her) from the convent. She was sent to hospital, and though she was cared for and given the needful consolations of religion, she found the inevitable publicity, the talk and bustle almost unbearable after the 'elected silence' of the cloister.

How sweetly she bore this discipline was evident in the impression she made on her companions in the ward and her influence upon them, most of them working girls. Anyone who has worked in a sanatorium knows how gallant such patients can be, but the little nun who loved silence must often have marvelled why they liked to chatter so much. She had to endure a desolation of spirit never experienced in the silence and rigour of the convent.

Release came at last and she was sent home to Grottaferrata again and to her Mother Abbess. 'My mother can do more than the doctors', she said. There were still months of suffering to be borne; the oblation was to be a costly one. But there was the solace of knowing that she bore it in union with the Passion of our Lord, that she was offering it towards the fulfilment of his desire for unity in his Church. To live, even in pain, under the same roof as Jesus was the supreme joy.

Suffering must always be lonely—but for the divine companionship. The most compassionate, tender and skilful nurse cannot actually feel the pain and weakness endured by the patient. And death must be approached by every soul alone though prayers and loving thoughts flutter around the traveller like birds from Paradise. There is a stretch of the road that must be trodden alone with God. That part of the way now lay before Suor Maria Gabriella. She was reminded one day when her spirit was humiliated by the body's agony, that St Thérèse also had died of tuberculosis. 'But she was a saint', was the humble reply.

Her agony ended at Eastertide 1939, on the eve of Europe's

agony. The gospel for the second Sunday after Easter is that which is at the heart of the prayers for Unity: 'Ego sum pastor bonus: et cognosco meas, et cognoscunt me meae. . . . Et alias oves habeo quae non sunt ex hoc ovili: et illas oportet me adducere, et vocem meam audient, et fiet unum ovile, et unus pastor.' When the hour of his Passion was very near, our Lord prayed, 'That they may be one'.

That was the prayer—that the ancient schism should be healed and mutual charity restored—that was offered by Suor Gabriella, not only with her lips and in her heart but with her very life; with the many years of ardent vitality that, humanly speaking, seemed secured to her. She died as the great darkness of war was falling upon the nations, when peace and unity appeared almost beyond hope, when her own country of Italy and the England for which she so fervently interceded were to be divided awhile in enmity.

What her oblation may, in God's mercy, help to achieve is known only to God's wisdom; but from thousands outside the flock of St Peter, yet seeking the same pastures, rises continually the prayer of the Good Shepherd, 'That they may be one'.



## THE UNITY OCTAVE

BY

A DISCALCED CARMELITE



IN the eve of the feast of St Peter's Chair at Rome, when the octave of prayers for Christian unity begins, I am reminded of our Lord's prayer, recorded only by St John, perhaps because he was leaning on his Master's breast at the last Supper, where he could hear every word. That strange, mystic prayer asked for a stupendous privilege for his loved ones. And these loved ones were not only the apostles, for our Lord said that he prayed not only for these, but 'for them also who through their word, shall believe in me'. And the prayer was this:

'That they all may be one, as thou, Father, in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.'

Today, the words 'mystic', 'divine union', 'spiritual marriage' and others of the same kind are spoken with a certain hesitancy, as though there might be some doubt concerning their authenticity.