

Wife, Mother and Mystic

(Blessed Anna-Maria Taigi)

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INTRODUCTION

In 1860 the Parisian Catholic newspaper *Univers* was suppressed by imperial authority for publishing an Encyclical of Pope Pius IX. Its Editor, the brilliant and incisive Louis Veuillot, who had made it a powerful weapon for championing the Church against the growing forces of atheistic materialism, took refuge in Rome. He arrived there at the moment that the Pope was considering the beatification of Anna-Maria Taigi. She had been dead no more than twenty-three years, yet the greatness of her soul had so impressed his mind that Louis Veuillot wrote to Pope Pius IX on March 6th of that year, begging him to introduce her cause. Not content with this, he consecrated to Anna-Maria Taigi a chapter of his book, *The Fragrance of Rome*.

Under the heading “Anna-Maria, Servant of God,” he wrote:

“In the decree that introduces the process for the beatification of Anna-Maria it is said that she was chosen by God to draw souls to Him, to be a victim of expiation, to avert great catastrophies, all by the power of her prayers. . . .

“To the opened floodgates of iniquity God opposed a simple woman.

“She whose unknown name was thus announced to the world twenty-five years after her death, was, as far as social status counts, something even less than a ‘simple woman.’ She was the impoverished wife of a serving man at the palace of the Chigi.

“Thirty years before one could have met her in the streets, an old, infirm woman on her way to visit Our Lord, either sacramentally in a church or mystically at a sick bed. The dignity of her poverty, a certain air of majesty, the interested looks that passersby turned on her attracted the attention of strangers. Sometimes with

awe, sometimes in derision would be heard, "There goes the saint!"

"In Rome, as everywhere, saints encounter a twofold trial—praise and calumny. They fear praise and love calumny. Poor Anna-Maria could not escape becoming one of the great personalities of Rome. She possessed the gift of miracles. She spread about her, with a large munificence, cures, consolation and light. For herself she asked only to obey, to love and to suffer. She lived by the labor of her hands.

"Numerous witnesses have testified to the splendor of this noble life. She was a Teresa, a contemplative . . . but without a cell. She had a husband to serve, a rough though good and upright man; she had many children, a thousand cares, frequent illnesses, enemies and detractors.

"She had been beautiful and attractive, but she did not wait till the flower of her beauty and grace had faded; she surrendered herself generously the moment her call came.

"Her intellectual gifts were altogether overshadowed by an unexampled miracle. Shortly after she had entered on the way of perfection there began to appear to her a golden globe which became as a sun of matchless light; in this all things were revealed to her.

"Past and future were to her an open book.

"She knew with certainty the fate of the dead. Her gaze travelled to the ends of the earth and discovered there people on whom she had never set eyes, reading them to the depth of their souls. One glance sufficed; upon whatever she focused her thoughts, it was revealed to her and her understanding. She saw the whole world as we see the front of a building. It was the same with nations as with individuals; she saw the cause of their distresses and the remedies that would heal them.

"By means of this permanent and prodigious miracle, the poor wife of Domenico Taigi became a theologian, a teacher and a prophet. The miracle lasted forty-seven years. Until her death the humble woman was able to read this mysterious sun as an ever-open book. Until her death she looked into it solely for

the glory of God; that is, when charity suggested or obedience demanded it. Should things for which she had not looked, or which she did not understand, appear she refrained from asking explanations.

“The poor, the great of the world, the princes of the Church came to her for advice or help. They found her in the midst of her household cares and often suffering from illness. She refused neither her last crust of bread nor the most precious moment of her time, yet she would accept neither presents nor praise.

“Her most powerful friends could not induce her to allow them to favor her children beyond the conditions in which they were born. When she was at the end of her resources she told God about it, and God sent what was necessary.

“She thought it good to live from day to day, like the birds. A refugee queen in Rome wished to give her money. ‘Madame,’ she said, ‘how simple you are. I serve God, and He is richer than you.’

“She touched the sick, and they were cured; she warned others of their approaching end, and they died holy deaths. She endured great austerities for the souls in Purgatory, and the souls, once set free, came to thank her. . . . She suffered in body and soul. . . . She realized that her role was to expiate the sins of others, that Jesus was associating her with His sacrifice, and that she was a victim in His company. The pains of Divine Love have an intoxication no words can explain. After Holy Communion there were times when she sank down as though smitten by a prostrating stroke. To tell the truth, her state of ecstasy was continual because her sense of the presence of God was continual. . . . All pain was sweet to her. . . . She went her way, her feet all bloody; with shining eyes she followed the Royal Way.

“Behold, then, the spectacle God raised to men’s sight in Rome during that long tempestuous period which began at the time the humble Anna-Maria took to the way of saints. Pius VI dies at Valence; Pius VII is a prisoner at Fontainebleau; the Revolution will reappear before Gregory XVI reigns. Men are saying that the day of the Popes is over, that Christ’s law and Christ Himself are

on the wane, that science will soon have relegated this so-called Son of God to the realm of dreams. . . . He will work no more miracles.

“But at precisely this time God raised up this woman to cure the sick. . . . He gives her knowledge of the past, present and future. She declares that Pius VII will return. . . . She sees even beyond the reign of Pius IX. . . . She is God’s answer to the challenge of unbelief.”

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The pages which Louis Veillot wrote in his little retreat at the Trinita dei Monti received the commendation of Pius IX; they are, in fact, a prophetic summary of the Decree of Beatification promulgated by Benedict XV, May 30, 1920. They were remembered with additional force in 1937, when the Church celebrated the centenary of the death of the Blessed Anna-Maria Taigi, the great lady of Rome—“the Patron of Rome,” as Cardinal Salotti, her definitive biographer, calls her.

They are, furthermore, a fitting introduction to this volume. Blessed Anna-Maria Taigi was (and indeed is becoming more and more) “the answer of God” to a rationalism triumphant but restive and in search of the unknown God. The dedication of this book: “To those who are in search of God,” and the quotations from Bergson and Louis Bertrand given in that dedication, bear emphatic witness to this questing restiveness. To them might be added the words of William James: “It is a question of finding out whether mystic states are not windows opening out on a new world,” as well as those of Father Leonce de Grandmaison, S.J.: “These high experiences are signed and sealed like documents of their journeyings brought by explorers from inaccessible lands.”

Therein is defined the object of this book. I have passed over nothing from a historical point of view, but the readers for whom I write would seem to be different from those for whom the early biographers of the saint wrote. I do not write primarily for believers already long established in the peace of the Faith (although the

book may perhaps serve their purpose as well), but for that throng whom St. Paul addressed from the steps of the Areopagus: the pilgrims in search of the unknown God, the God for whom they were groping, who was yet not far from them.

Now the reasonings of St. Paul would have only been partly effective if he had not been able to add, with the eloquence of an eyewitness: "This God, I have seen Him with my eyes, and heard Him with my ears. It is He who has transformed my life."

Pius XI speaks of "souls naturally Christian who have the faith, as it were a fire beneath the ashes," and so are predisposed to the light by "admirable natural virtues." To such souls this book would say: "Behold the answer of the Lord; behold news from the other world." Finally, for those who realize that "there are more things in Heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy," these pages present a vast subject of meditation.

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"Here below," said Napoleon at Fontanes, "there are only two powers, the sword and the spirit, but sooner or later the spirit conquers the sword." He did not know how truly he spoke. Documents of so detailed a nature that they cannot be ignored show the existence of an invisible duel organized by God, a duel to which the Decree cited at the beginning of the present work bears witness, between the Revolution and Anna Taigi; between him who was the victor over, and the soldier of, the Revolution, the helper and then the tormentor of the Papacy, Napoleon I, and this humble Roman matron. In this duel the Papacy, its liberty, its system of doctrine and morals stands for the "spirit," and is represented by an illiterate woman who shall have the last word. The Blessed Taigi shall conquer Napoleon; and yet, by a divine vengeance, she shall console and shall guide in their exile the aged mother of the fallen Emperor, Letitia, and the brother of the Empress, Cardinal Fesch.

§

What I have just said must not make us overlook other aspects

of this life. The mission of the saint, according to the Decree of Introduction and the Decree of Beatification, is manifold.

It is firstly a unique model for the family, for wives and mothers. It concerns a soul quite different from the virgins, nuns and widows canonized by the Church. The Blessed Taigi alone presents to our eyes the holiness of the mother of many children, of the wife who until death abides subject to a husband, "God-fearing and upright, but unpolished, rough and turbulent." She is a model for all wives, but especially for those who gain their bread in the sweat of their brow; Blessed Anna Taigi was poor. In her the Church will canonize the common life, the ideal of Nazareth.

Secondly, in this common life Anna Taigi is a victim of expiation; she atones for the sins of the shepherds and the sheep. On the heart of this poor woman the justice of God smites as on an anvil. . . . She is the lightning-conductor of the Papacy and of the world . . . at once, "the lightning-conductor and the lighthouse" in the revolutionary epoch. Thus do the Popes say, thus do they repeat.

It was an apocalyptic period in which thrones fell and people threw off restraints. Anna Taigi, in voluntary poverty, athirst for self-effacement, constitutes "the condemnation of this century wherein materialism, lies and pride predominate"—as Pius IX himself, the personified defense of the spiritual, said on March 4, 1874. Voltairian philosophy became a craze. Science, drunk with discovery of steam and electricity, had given its marching orders to the supernatural. God raises up an insignificant little woman to "cast down the pomp of the world, to oppose like a rock the waters of iniquity, raging to ruin the foundations of the Church and civil society. He makes of her a victim of expiation and a "bulwark of defense."¹ The frontiers between the visible and invisible worlds are levelled to the ground, and God walks among men.

1. Decree of Introduction.

PART I

THE PREPARATION

Chapter I

HER ORIGIN—THE GIANNETTI FAMILY—BIRTH—DISASTER—ROME—AT SCHOOL—ST. BENEDICT LABRE

Anna-Maria was born at Siena on May 29, 1769. She opened her eyes to a world in chaos, very like our own. In France the Court of Louis XV, sunk in debauchery, intrigues and factions, prepared the way for its own ruin and that of Christianity. The Minister Choiseul rejoiced to see the Press flood France with literature that scoffed at traditional beliefs. *The Encyclopaedia*, for a while suppressed, thrived anew, and Voltaire was in the ascendant. As an old man of seventy-five he inundated the world with his "encyclicals."

The vitality of all things was sapped at the root—the Church, morals, royalty. Jeering displaced discussion. Vice was brazen and shameless. Louis XV, at sixty, put the finishing touch to his royal disgrace. The libertines, to dissuade him from a new marriage which might have reclaimed him, threw him a woman taken from the gutter, by the name of du Barry. The price of bread rose, the national deficit touched seventy-four millions, the people murmured; the young prince whose inclement destiny it was to become Louis XVI married an Austrian archduchess, the unfortunate Marie Antoinette. Magnificent celebrations were sullied by the presence of Mme du Barry and by the blood of 1,200 Parisians whom the firework display threw into a panic.

At Rome reigns Clement XIV, who is about to suppress the Jesuits at the instigation of the Bourbons. The most Catholic nations are dragged into this whirlpool: Spain, Italy, Poland. The nobility of the last were second to none in godlessness; even the king sold his motherland. A Masonic Temple was installed at

Warsaw on July 7, 1770, and the nuncio reported 250 carriages drawn up at its gate and the flower of the nobility thronging into it. The very princesses craved the honor of Masonic affiliation, following the example of the Princess de Lamballe. The Duke of Orleans (Philip Égalité) was to be President of French Freemasonry.

§

At Siena, the home of Anna-Maria, the Jesuits, driven from their college, had to live as seculars.

The "Beata" sprang from an honorable family. Her grandfather, Peter Giannetti (the name is spelled with one "n" or two, indifferently) kept a chemist's shop in Siena; his son Louis, taught the same trade, married a good Catholic of lowly fortune, Mary Santa Masi, who bore him, on May 29, 1769, a girl child, the future Beata. Two and a half months later, on the Feast of the Assumption, on the Island of Corsica, facing this Tuscan territory, Napoleon I was born. Like Anna, he was of Italian and Tuscan blood. Like her, he was of a middle-class but impoverished family. Thirty years later their souls were to encounter each other before the Chair of Peter—he, the conqueror of the world, striving to overthrow that Chair; she, the poor wife of a porter, defending it like a second Catherine of Siena, who in the fourteenth century had been "the bulwark of the Papacy." Again the weak thing was to have the last word.

Although in all probability Napoleon and Annette never saw one another, nevertheless "history," as Cardinal Salotti writes, "must unite these two names when it speaks of the misfortunes of Pius VII, dragged from one prison to another by the all-powerful Emperor, yet inwardly sustained by the tears and prayers of this holy woman." Pius VII regains his liberty: the Emperor is shut up in Elba. "The prayer of the Beata had more power than the might of the Imperial armies. History, which concerns itself with the study of human, social and political events, takes no account of a poor woman's influence on the fall of Napoleon. But what the

historian does not see are the mysterious ways of God, who, at the prayer of a simple soul, decrees the destruction of the mighty and the humiliation of the proud.”

Anna was baptized the day after her birth, in the Church of St. John Baptist at Siena. She received the names of Anna Maria Antonia Gesualda. Cared for by her mother, she passed her childhood playing among the olives and cypresses, the trellised vines and roses that crown the high plateau that dominates, with its red walls, the sandy plains of Tuscany. It was the landscape that had been familiar to Catherine, the twenty-third child of Benincasa, the dyer, and the despotic Lappa, who at the age of six, in 1352, saw the Christ appear above the church of the Dominicans, dressed in pontificals and crowned with the tiara, calling her to the salvage of the “little bark” of Peter, and who thereafter took upon herself the burdens of the Church until she died at the age of thirty-three.

At six, Anna’s life also underwent a portentous change. She and her family left Siena for Rome. Luigi Giannetti’s business had failed, either because his debts were too heavy and those who owed him money too neglectful, or because of his lack of business sense and his extravagance. His collapse was complete and was to embitter his life. Yet he remained an honorable man, making no attempt to evade what he owed, though it meant selling all he had. Still, shame at his fall was strong upon him, and he and his wife and Anna stole from Siena in the early morning when few eyes could see their going. In poor clothes and carrying the remnants of their belongings in packages, they set out to seek a new fortune. It was ordained that it should be misfortune, for it was necessary to God’s plan that in Rome the daughter of Luigi and Santa should live the life of the poor.

It was the year 1775. Pius VI, who had recently been elected, had proclaimed it a Holy Year—he was to die, after a reign of twenty-four years, a prisoner at Valence. It is possible that the little group joined one of the pilgrim parties going to Rome. The journey was made in short stages to save the child Annette

from fatigue, the nights being passed in the houses of hospitable farmers on the road. In Rome they were able to take advantage of the arrangements the Pope had made for the reception of the crowds.

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The three pilgrims of involuntary poverty found a home in the crowded dei Monti quarter, where lived that pilgrim of voluntary poverty, St. Benedict Labre. Here, until the death of the saint eight years later (1783), the Giannetti lived under a humble roof in the street dei Vergini. There can be no doubt they often met the holy young man, whose features recalled Robespierre's, at the Church of Our Lady dei Monti, at the foot of the miraculous statue of the Virgin, which was the witness of his ecstasies and the guardian of his tomb. On "Spy-Wednesday" 1783 this unique beggar fell dying on the steps of a church. He was carried into a butcher's house in the Via dei Serpenti, and died there at eight o'clock at night, his age being thirty-five years.

The children—Annette no doubt among them; she was then fourteen—went about the town crying, "The saint is dead!" Rome was going to give triumphal obsequies to a lousy mendicant.² Santa, Annette's mother, being "used to performing such acts of charity," helped wash the body and put it in its shroud. This would ever after be a precious memory in the family. Santa always carried a picture of the saint, invoking him and drawing from this souvenir the grace "to understand the poor,"³ passing it on to her daughter.

The Giannetti reached the City of the Seven Hills just as Pius VI had been elected after a long and difficult conclave. The city was *en fête*, life was easy. Luigi, always wayward and grandiose in his ideas and his "siesta" attitude towards life, eventually found a position as a domestic. Meanwhile he lived on his wife's earnings

2. The word is correct. St. Joseph Benedict Labre had lice.

3. "Blessed is he that understandeth concerning the poor and the needy; the Lord shall deliver him in the evil day." *Ps.* 11:1. Trs. note.

from charing. Though Santa had her faults she was at least pious, sensible and valiant: everything depended on her.

Each morning Annette carried her dinner in a wicker basket to the free school of the “Good Mistresses,” as they were called, founded early in the eighteenth century by Lucia Filippini. In this school, in the Via Graziosa, Annette’s comely appearance, refined manners, keen wits and solid piety gave joy to the mistresses. The excellent education included household instruction as well as religion, writing and arithmetic. Not only did Annette master the tributaries of the Tiber, but what was of more value to her, how to make a dress or prepare soup, to wind silk and fix it in the bobbins.

At seven she went to confession. At eleven she was confirmed in St. John Lateran, “the Mother and Head of All Churches.” At thirteen she made her First Communion in the parish church of St. Francis de Paul. Pious imaginations have run riot over these last two events.

The good Domenico, husband of the Beata, giving his testimony, as an old man of ninety, to the virtues of his wife said simply: “Her parents were good Catholics. I am sure they saw to it that their daughter received an excellent education and that she attended the sacraments in due course; I do not know precisely the time . . . but I do know for certain that they used to take her to church very early in the morning to Holy Mass. She went to Confession often—at least I suppose so.”

Domenico’s simplicity is delightful.

We are told, and it may be true, that the good women of the district used to pause at their work, brooms in hand, to watch her as she passed on her way to school with a red kerchief on her head, telling each other: “What a pretty child! Give her a white skirt with a golden fringe and she’d be like the daughter of a king.”

Father Calixtus, following Mgr. Natali, assures us that she did not fail to say her prayers with her parents morning and night. Over and above that there was the recitation of the Rosary, Annette giving out the mysteries. She helped her mother with the household work in the early part of the day. On Sunday, after dinner, she

went to the parish church for Catechism. Life was not without its clouds, but change of fortune did not disturb the ardent nature of the little girl from Siena, who accepted it with the ease of childhood. Yet it did embitter her father and mother. As dismal and trying days succeeded one another, far from becoming accustomed to their lot, they found the wound increasingly envenomed. Luigi, though primarily responsible for their position, far from beating his own breast, vented his ill humor on the child, ill-treating her without reason.

They never understood, as Annette came to understand as she grew older; meanwhile she bowed her head: God was molding her. Apparently she remained scarcely more than two years with the "Good Mistresses." An epidemic of smallpox, which left its traces on her face without actually disfiguring it, cut short her schooling, and subsequently she had to help her mother in the house. She never returned to school. She had learned to read but no more. She, about whom volumes were to be written, knew not how to write; in fact, scarcely knew how to sign her name. The wonderful accounts we have from her of what was revealed to her and what she discovered in her state of mystic prayer, were all dictated. God worked a miracle to teach St. Catherine of Siena to write; to confute the century of self-styled "enlightenment," he did not deign to do so in the case of Anna-Maria.

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This fact gave the Promoter of the Faith (the future Cardinal Verde) material for vigorous opposition to her cause, but her advocates replied with justice that the voluminous memoirs committed to paper by Mgr. Natali, her priest-secretary, were no more to be considered the work of the Beata than the life of Catherine of Siena by Raymund of Capua was to be considered the work of Catherine. Granted that all that Mgr. Natali relates is of an edifying character and of value to biographers, nevertheless (as he himself said), only his juridicial depositions taken under oath must be held as authentic in the strict sense of the term.

Apart from this, we must admit at the outset that very few saints' lives are as closely documented as that of Anna Taigi. Over and above the memoirs of Father Louis-Philip, her confessor, and the memoirs of Mgr. Natali, her confidential priest (these last are full of vexatious erasures and annotations made by hagiographers who used them), which would make two large volumes, we possess a document of matchless value—the deposition, amounting to one thousand pages, of Cardinal Pedicini.

Of a noble family of Beneventum, the Marquis Pedicini on becoming a priest consented to be the secretary of the humble working woman. For thirty years he noted down day by day the facts collected in his long deposition. Created Cardinal by Pius VII, Prefect of the Congregation of Immunity by Leo XII, Prefect of the Congregation of Rites by Pius VIII, Prefect of Propaganda and Vice-Chancellor of Holy Church by Gregory XVI, he did not die till six years after the Beata, after having given his testimony without hurry and in juridical form. It is a document of exceptional historical value, and is moreover confirmed by the depositions of some twenty witnesses, consisting of members of the family of the Beata, of princes of the Church, of ordinary men and women, and of the Roman aristocracy.

Anna, then, did not know how to write, or at the most made tortuous efforts at her signature. But that did not prevent her from knowing her catechism perfectly—in fact, “as well as a parish priest,” as her daughter Sophie deposed—or from reciting the Book of Psalms or amazing theologians by the certainty of her knowledge. True these things were a free gift from God but they were also the beneficial effect of her early Catholic education.

Her early trials were the means of saving her from pride, the first of her dangers. Poor she may have been, but the gifts she inherited gave her a certain superiority among the poor of which she was not ignorant. For the rest she was a good and obedient child. Grandma Santa would later on hold her up as an example to her grandchildren: “Anna-Maria, your mother did not behave like *that*. . . .”