Library Signpost

Spain's Greatest Woman

By REV. BENEDICT EHMANN

Saint Teresa of Avila, by William Thomas Walsh. (Bruce: $3)

She was like a thousand other girls in 16th century Spain: pretty; given over to vanities and the kind of embroidered romances which were later laughed off the stage by **Don Quixote**, deciding to enter the Carmel of her home city of Avila, not as a drastic change in her mode of life since in those days it did not entail that, but as a quiet niche for her quiet piety. But there was one thing in her which was unique, and not even she knew it as yet—and that was her self, that rare spectral self which go to beyond her youth had burst out only in flashes—the time when, still only a little girl, she persuaded her older brother Rodrigo to go with her to be martyred by the Moors; the time when, after her mother's death, she cast herself at the feet of the statue of Our Lady of Charity and said, "Now you must be my Mother!"

It was this self of Teresa, created rare and special by God, and foreordained from Eternity to be the steward of the choicest mystical graces, which manifests itself more and more in the accent of her life. When you begin to climb a mountain you are first on pretty level terrain, but then the land slopes more and more steeply up, the strong strata of rock thrust more violently through, and the air becomes rarer and more invigorating.

But what could she do? Here she was, outgrowing the scope of the Convent where she found herself feeling herself more and more impelled to take up the penitential life of the earlier Carmelite rule which had been largely slackened by papal permissions until it was only a shadow of its former self although as a result the religious could hardly be called shadows of what they might have been. Teresa was becoming increasingly aware of the deficiencies: no cloister, but a free and easy social exchange between visitors and nuns; as a consequence, no silence; the community too large: 130 is ten times too large even with perfect silence—without silence, it is 150 times too large; fasting poorly observed; prayer difficult.

This was the central conflict of Teresa's life. Every inch of ground she won she fought for first within her own soul, with sufferings innumerable, headaches, vomitings, faintings, desolations of spirit. So was the Reform established: what we now know as the Discalced Carmelites—small communities, no more than fifteen or so at the most in each, strictly cloistered, contemplative, dedicated to a rigorous regime of prayer and fasting.

The whole drama of the Teresian Reform, God's counterweight to the Lutheran and Calvinistic drives against the Church, is magnificently told in William Thomas Walsh's **Saint Teresa of Avila**. The author of **Isabella the Crusader**, **Philip II** and **Characters of the Inquisition** has proven himself to be the staunch Catholic and the expert historian of Spanish affairs that it would take to attempt the biography of this greatest Spaniard of them all. Only those who know at least a little about the historical method can appreciate the immense effort it must have been to have marshalled so many crowded, turbulent, and sometimes conflicting, facts into an orderly progress.

Yet it is not a Movement which Dr. Walsh is recording: it is a person. And what a person! La Madre, they called Her—the Mother! And such she towers in these chapters — feminine to the very core of her. Her eye on great goals does not overlook the needs of here and now—produce, or baskets, or pins and needles. Her observation of human nature is that of genius. She has wit and unfailing good nature. These things alone would have made her a leader.

But they would not have made her a Saint. Here Dr. Walsh's portrait reveals its surest, boldest lines. You are never let to forget that this is the drama of a soul which has made its choice of God and which now unwaveringly deals all, stakes all, interprets all that one way, with God the Spouse all the while communicating Himself in His delights and adorning His bride with a thousand mystical practices. It says much for the soul of the author that he has expressed so clearly even the most obscure and tenebrous of the mystical gifts: his eye must be used to God's light, so as to see light where others see only darkness, and then to depict it in luminous words which offer the least resistance. There are pages of this book which are the finest of their kind that I have ever read on the mystical life.

Dr. Walsh is wise to let Teresa speak often and at length in her own words: from her biography her **Way of Perfection**, her **Interior Castle and Mansions**, and her extensive correspondence. Though other translations were available, he went to the pains of offering his own so as to invest it with just that vim and verve and homeliness which he says are so evident in the original. Even her frequent mistakes in syntax are duplicated. The impression after long reading of this is one of much redundancy and wordage, the only thing that is going to make some people find it hard going. A later reduced edition for more general appeal will very likely prune these down considerably. But I, for one, treasure every excess word, every dangling sentence, every repetitious phrase: they are the pleasurable mannerisms of a friend I love intensely.

Be it said in warning that this is not a book for convent novices, nor for anyone below senior college level either academically or intellectually. The pageant of life which moves across its pages fulfils the parable of the cockle and the wheat: amidst the power and the glory of God, there is much satanic sowing of violence and contention and the other disorders of concupiscence. But the mature whose soul is rooted in prayer and the seeking for God will find in this Life of St Teresa, so magnificently presented, an incentive for joy in the myriad ways of God with His saints.

Charm of Youth

Life is never a flowery paradise that it appears through youthful eyes. Youth will always see its visions and dream its dreams. That is what gives youth its peculiar charm and makes it a blessed state in which their elders ever turn to with regretful eyes.

Christmas In The Rectory

This next week will be the busiest weekend of the year for your pastor. He'll spend Friday morning over in the church, supervising construction of the crib. There will be the big framework of the stable to be brought out of storage, and all kinds of heavy statues to be put in place. Then the church will have to be trimmed and the altar decorated. He'll have to get the evergreens, trees and garlands and poinsettias, and everything else possible in green and red for Christmas.

Then comes an hour or so for reading his breviary and preparing the Christmas announcements, upbraiding altar-boys and ushers and then, at three o'clock the confessions begin. If it is a busy ministry, it's also a consoling one. The faithful come in crowds, with large numbers of black sheep stirred by the grace of the season to slough off the accumulated wickedness of years.

The crowd presses until supper, when Father must leave the confessional like Our Lord stepping into the boat on the Sea of Galilee to find some little rest from His eager followers. By seven o'clock he is back. The few hours lines begin to blow out. dirty the church has a breath and eleven, when the when Midnight Mass.

What happiness he has then repeating the tidings of great joy, creating a new Bethlehem on the altar, before his people, and then bringing to each one, personally, the Prince of Peace!

He may not have breakfast after this Mass; there are two Masses to be offered next morning. You may know that he is very tired by the time he has offered all of his Christmas Masses and finished the glowing prayers of the Divine Office.

But the rectory is a lonely place on Christmas Day. It is one day on which Father realizes most keenly the sacrifice he has made for the sake of his ministry in giving up a family of his own. There are no children in the rectory.

All over the world priests will be having that same Christmas—ou-

The Word of the Lord Came to John

Christmas brings Christ to the world, the public life and preaching brings knowledge of Christmas and of Christ to all the world. The birth of Christ, the joys of the first Christmas night, were known to Mary and Joseph, to the Shepherds, to the Angels. Christmas means so much to us because it is the beginning of that saving career of the Redeemer that included the infancy, the hidden life, the public life and finally the Death and Resurrection of the Saviour.

Hence we find Advent referring in the Liturgy not merely to the approaching birth of Christ, but also to the opening of His ministry. In today's Gospel we find St. Luke describing in great detail the time of the opening of Christ's public ministry. The Roman Emperor's fifteenth year, the names of the rulers of the various Jewish divisions, the names of the two High Priests of the Jews, are given clear mention. The preaching of John the Baptist is the event that is announced for this time. "The Word of the Lord came to John." It was a word of summons, a word of calling: the time of preparation of John for his mission as Precursor of the Lord, had come to its close. He was now to do the immediate work of preparing the people for the public appearance and preaching of Christ.

Into to all the region about the Jordan River went John. He preached a baptism of penance unto the remission of sin. He called all to repentance and conversion from evil, he invited all to newness of life. Christ was ready to redeem, to save; but sinful man could share in His salvation only when ready to turn away from sin. Christ's healing power, Christ's saving merits, would be ready for all who were ready to receive Him: they could not receive Him except through that change of heart that would make them give up sin.

It was no easy task set for John the Baptist. Just as for the coming of a great worldly potentate, valleys were to be filled, mountains and hills were to be brought low, the crooked ways were to be made straight and the rough ways plain, that the road might invite his easy passing; so in the hearts of men, every obstacle to the entrance of Christ was to be removed. Sin and sinful habits, wicked thoughts and plannings, unbelief and its results, were to be destroyed by the will of men who looked for the help of Christ. And men were now after conversion to see what men never before had seen, the Salvation of God. We look to Christmas as the natal day of the Salvation of God, the birthday of Christ. May conversion from evil in accordance with the appeal of John the Baptist, prepare us to see the Salvation of God!

STRANGE BUT TRUE

Little-Known Facts for Catholics

By M. J. MURRAY

Teheran-Cairo Conference

Editorial comment in the Catholic press on the "Big Three" Conference recently concluded at Cairo and Teheran has been noticeably meager up-to-date.

In the few editorials appearing so far, Catholic editors have assumed the attitude of hopeful expectation or of "wait-and-see."

"The text of the joint declaration (Teheran)," stated the **Chicago New World**, "covered a good deal of ground, and if carried out sincerely, should lay some foundation for international harmony. As in the Moscow Pact, however, the Baltic and Polish problem was conspicuous by its absence . . . we would like to believe that the strong sentences of the Teheran Conference are not empty phrases which will perish at the peace."

Drawing the optimistic inference that "Russia is ready to march in step with the democratic nations and restore the freedom of its people," **Elmer Murphy, N.C.W.C. Correspondent**, concludes: "The declarations of the Teheran Conferences, are of necessity very general. The real test of them will come in putting them into effect and only time will prove or disprove Stalin's sincerity of purpose."

Disappointed and unenthusiastic, the **Rev. John S. Kennedy, editor of Hartford's Catholic Transcript**, writes:

". . . the Declaration of the Three Powers, issued after the recent meeting in Tehran, is not a document calculated to spur the heart and shore up crumbling expectations of a genuine, working, durable peace. The declaration itself is vague and hyper-cautiously worded. True, it is unequivocal in its assertion that a United Nations victory is inevitable. True, it says, without any hint of doubt, that lasting peace is guaranteed. It may be assumed that a common strategy has been arrived at; it is plain that the tools for doing the job are at hand. But it is not plain that the conferees have taken even the first step toward a fully satisfactory peace."

For those who voice concern that the Teheran and Cairo meetings offer no blueprint for world peace, the **Albany Evangelist** notes:

"It must be kept in mind that these parleys are really strategy meetings, geared principally to the prosecution of the war. As such they merit everyone's prayer for success and blessing for achievement. Their aim is to bring an early end to the conflict an end sincerely and feverishly desired by all.

"Their highest accomplishments can be only an armistice. The peace must be fashioned later."

From St. Paul, Minn., **The Wanderer**, a national Catholic weekly, editorializes:

"Both conferences (Teheran and Cairo) had this in common . . . they did not bring the expected and hoped-for clarification concerning the political and territorial reorganization of post-war Europe and the East. It is true that the declarations of the Teheran conference concerning the post-war order presuppose the principles enumerated in the Atlantic Charter when they speak of a world family of democratic nations, in which all the nations, large and small, will be welcome. But we know no more now than we did before concerning Russia's unofficial but outspoken claims to Eastern Poland, the Baltic States and other areas of Eastern Europe."

Finding in the meeting of the allied leaders "a promise of better things to come," the Rochester CATHOLIC COURIER last week stated editorially:

"Good men everywhere will find comfort in the work accomplished by the Teheran Conference. The definite word of Stalin and Churchill and Roosevelt promising an end to oppression and intolerance, offering all nations membership within the family of nations, should remove the suspicions that have haunted many minds concerning the degree of unity between the Allies and particularly concerning the sameness of purpose that guides their drive toward victory."

Five and Ten Years Ago

(From the Files of the CATHOLIC COURIER)

From Dec. 14, 1938, Edition

"Your greatest power for good shall always be in this the good example you and your families have set your fellowmen." His Excellency, the Most Rev. Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, Apostolic Delegate to the United States to the Knights of Columbus at a reception in his honor at Washington, D. C.

From Dec. 15, 1938, Edition

"The Catholic Church opposes and always will oppose dictatorships whether these dictatorships appear under the name of Communism, Nazism, Fascism or the hybrid Capitalism, declared the Rev. Donald M. Cleary, Catholic Chaplain at Cornell University . . . fore 500 persons gathered . . . man persecution . . . in Europe . . .

Confessions without number, and millions of Holy Communions.

If your boy is in the service, comfort yourself in the knowledge that you can hold a reunion in spirit at the altar on this Christmas Day. Know that the same Christ Child is entering into both your soul and his, the Infant King who brings with Himself peace of mind and heart.