



Adeodata Pisani
A Mystic Nun in Mdina

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A Theological Reflection on Maria Adeodata Pisani A Mystic Nun in Mdina

Hector Scerri

*T*he Latin phrase *oner et onus* is, in my humble opinion, very appropriate in describing my reaction when invited by Mother Abbess Maria Adeodata Testaferrata de Noto to pen a few theological insights on this striking and thought-provoking biography by Rev. Professor Peter Serracino Inglott (1936-2012), my late teacher, mentor, friend and fellow priest. *Oner et onus*, in other words, an honour and a burden: it is indeed an honour and a privilege to be entrusted with this daunting task while reading into the unravelling of the life of the Blessed Maria Adeodata Pisani (1806-55) as masterfully and creatively presented by Fr Peter, *Non sum dignus!* At the same time, it is an onerous task as I sift the plethora of strata and profound intuitions by the philosopher-priest. There is always more than one can chew in the mouthfuls from Fr Peter's intricate cuisine.

I admit that I have not been altogether unfamiliar with the life of the saint. During the year of her beatification in 2001, I did read a couple of versions of her biography. This means that I had a fair idea of the framework and parameters of the life of Pisani. In the past, I have also had the opportunity to delve into her spiritual diary translated into Maltese. Yet, I have to state from the start that reading Fr Peter's work offered a quantum leap into the presentation of the life of the religious nun we are talking about. His contextualisation of events in Naples, where she was born, and Malta, where she spent her adult life, as well as his perspicacious intertwining of biographical data with philosophy, psychology,



Ven. Maria Adeodata Pisani OSB,
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theology and Christian spirituality, left my mouth wide open, and my mind racing like a Formula One sports-car. This *opus* reveals the width and depth, as well as the nooks and crannies, of the humble author, besides those of the mystic nun. His literary style is indeed extraordinary, her unconventional path to perfection inspiring.

My modest reflections will be focused on the theological tenets of what I have read in between Serracino Inglott's lines. Let me set the record straight from the beginning of what I write. Mine is only one possible theological reading of Maria Adeodata's biography. I admit that colleagues of mine may read into the text and extrapolate other fine theological cords which, at the moment, are oblivious to me. My theological evaluation of the book is tripartite: (1) the Christological or incarnationalist perspective; (2) secondly, the sacramental-liturgical dimension; and (3) thirdly, the eschatological aspect. Other aspects are included in conjunction with these three.

I am captivated by the strongly incarnationalist perspective which is portrayed by the author. Just as 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (Jn 1:14) and took upon himself all that is human, except our sinful nature, Maria Adeodata, perhaps without realizing, sought to 'incarnate' herself in the Maltese milieu when she left Naples, and even more so, when she embraced her religious vocation. Her attempt at mastering our Semitic tongue and the way she was often derided by local speakers reveals her genuine determination to cross the Rubicon and to become one with her estranged father's birthplace and culture. At one point, Fr Peter uses the term 'incarnationalist spirituality' when referring to Maria Adeodata. Not only was the traditional-cum-colourfully elaborate Neapolitan nativity scene part of Maria Adeodata's Advent and Christmas experience, both before and after she entered the monastery, but it was a lynchpin to her spiritual life.

The Incarnation was so central to her spiritual journey, that she sought to put the *kenosis* of the Word as the permeating background to her own radical choices and decisions. The greatest act of communication in the history of humanity is the Incarnation when the Eternal Word became a human being, and spoke a human language in order to be the Revealer, the Revealed and the Revelation. The Word or Logos implies communication, indeed communication to the highest degree. Analogically, Maria Adeodata's incarnationalist spirituality led her to do something similar.

The way Maria Adeodata accepted her physical limitation again denotes how down to earth she was. And this attitude in the saint was not only the result of a sharpened degree of resilience, but also one of the fruits of her spiritual journey. Fr Peter writes: 'The reaction to physical deformity is most often anger and resentment. But in Maria Adeodata's case, it first showed itself in amused irony, and then in her unusual empathy with the underprivileged'. She was so anchored in Jesus Christ that it became second nature to her to abase herself

and undergo her own personal *kenosis* – not only from a physical point of view, but also in her loving relationship with those in the community who were a cause of moral suffering, particularly Sr Scholastica.

Throughout the text, the hidden refrain which I can sense is Maria Adeodata's determination to put Jesus' words into practice: 'Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart' (Mt 11:29), as well as: 'If any one wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Mk 8:34).

The text reveals the intricacies of the vulnerability of God. This is an important aspect in theology, although certain authors prefer to steer clear of it. Whereas for many centuries, the emphasis was on the impassible nature of God, in contemporary theology, we do indeed encounter references to the suffering of God. In God, suffering is not a defect or weakness, but rather, it reveals the greatness of his love. Because God loves, he suffers. *The Crucified God* by the contemporary Lutheran theologian Jurgen Moltmann (b.1926) underlines the vulnerability of God: not the death of God, but death in God. Fr Peter, in tandem with Cardinal Basil Hume, affirms that 'God himself showed himself to be vulnerable'. In his encyclical letter on Christian hope *Spe Salvi* (30 November 2007), Pope Benedict XVI affirms: 'None of us is capable of eliminating the power of evil, of sin which, as we plainly see, is a constant source of suffering. Only God is able to do this: only a God who personally enters history by making himself man and suffering within history' (par.36).

God works miracles in Maria Adeodata's own vulnerability. If she is the Bride of Christ, she has to resemble her bridegroom who is vulnerable. Her own background is full of wounds, starting from the difficult marital relationship between her parents, her father's drunkenness, his days in prison, and all the rest. Nothing to be proud of! Yet, years later, she asks her father to bless her, in full view of passers-by at the Saqqajja in Rabat. She is sanctified not *despite* her brokenness, but *through* it. I am reminded of the renowned book by Henri Nouwen (1932-96), *The Wounded Healer*, first published in 1972. The latter person becomes an instrument of God's healing love because he/she has experienced pain and healing. This fits in neatly with what Fr Peter states: 'Broken, they become apter to carry the load of God's love'. This may sound paradoxical.

Throughout the biography, this notion of paradox shines through. From life in high society, Maria Adeodata embraces the monastic vocation. Her mother was thinking of wedding her to Cavalier Antonio. But whose bride will she become? Christ's or Antonio's? Fr Peter reflects upon the very paradoxical source of the beauty of some flowers, used to crown the feet of Mary, rather than her head. Again, even silence can be part of this paradox. The silence we are speaking about is not the silence of grave, graveyard, tombstones and flickering candles. It is the 'deafening silence' (1 Kings 19:12) experienced by the prophet Elijah. It is that state wherein we are able to listen to God.

Fr Peter affirms that Maria Adeodata ‘went further than Kierkegaard in her rejection of idle talk, of sniggering, taunting and mockery, by plunging herself into the silence of the cloister’. The many facets of the concept of paradox in Maria Adeodata’s life are indeed related to the way she embraced the kenotic experience. Her constant and consistent death-to-self allows us to affirm that she was putting into practice Jesus’s words: ‘Unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest (Jn 12:24). Jesus’ statement, taken from a rural-agrarian context, fits in very closely with the themes she had developed *The Garden*.

The ‘garden’ is a major theme in Maria Adeodata’s spirituality. Fr Peter masterfully treats this topic in several sections of the book – from the pots of flowers and plants in the house of her relatives in Rabat (Daniele and Maddalena Bonici Mompalao) to the monastery garden, to her own interior garden – and does so in greater detail in Part Four on ‘Carmelite Mental Prayer’. It is highly probable that Fr Peter had the theme of the beauty of the garden of Carmel at the back of his mind. The garden theme is a highly evocative and important one in Scripture, starting from the aesthetic wonder and the exotic nature of the Garden of Eden, right through the Johannine presentation of the soul-wrenching arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. At the very centre of this long biblical journey through the Kew Gardens of the Bible, one encounters the marvellous sapiential text and shining gem of the Song of Songs. I love to read Maria Adeodata’s *The Garden* in conjunction with the Song of Songs. They go hand in hand, or I would say, they can be inextricably bound together as the tendrils of the vine bind themselves to the trestles or perhaps, to the neighbouring branches belonging to other arboreal vegetation. This reminds us of the pericope where Jesus describes himself as the vine: he is the vine and we are the branches (Jn 15: 1-8).

The major thrust of the biography, as I see it, is the Christological emphasis and focus it contains, reflecting Maria Adeodata’s conviction that nothing is to be placed before Christ. Jesus is her absolute priority. After all, the Benedictine Rule says this iconically ... *nulla anteporre* to the love of Christ. This Christological thrust has its own ramifications which I will now highlight.

Christians celebrate Jesus Christ in the liturgy. Blessed Maria Adeodata Pisani poignantly recalls her First Holy Communion, and all the details of that special day. Many years later she finds it difficult to convince the hard-headed young novice Scholastica to receive the Eucharist daily. Why was the latter so obstinate? Was it a stroke of Jansenism and Port-Royal? Was it spite against her superior or fellow sister? We do not know the reason why. On the other hand, Maria Adeodata delighted herself at being able to communicate daily. The biography also refers several times to her confessors, in particular Padre Serafino. Fr Peter very correctly states ‘that the monastic profession is a sort of death and rebirth, as it were, a prolongation and renewal of baptism’.

In the section which bears the subtitle 'Voices of a Site', the author explores the interface of theatre and liturgy. He does so not only by the curious practice of drawing 'crib tickets' by lottery a few days prior to Christmas, but also by the even more curious revelation that excavations witnessed that there was, in Roman times, a theatre at the monastery site. This immediately reminds me of an article by Peter Serracino Inglott, 'Theatre and Liturgy? Two Hesitant Footnotes to Hans Urs von Balthasar' in the book *Living Theology* which I edited on the centenary of the birth of Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Bernard Lonergan and Hans Urs von Balthasar, and published in 2007. Relying on other sources, Fr Peter states in his article that 'the celebration of the liturgy has obvious affinities with drama' (p.189).

The monastery site was also home to a hospital in the Middle Ages, until 1455 when the Borgia Pope Calixtus III suppressed the hospital in order to found a nunnery. This fact enables Serracino Inglott to make a connection with Maria Adeodata's care of the sick which was a priority to her. The word 'heal' is etymologically related to the word 'whole', as well as to the German word 'heil' which refers to salvation. Healing and wholeness are part of a continuum. The therapeutic effect of sacramental grace is an aspect which can be underlined while reading into what Fr Peter has had to say in the section 'The Sick are our Hosts in Waiting'.

Sacramental grace has a transforming and transformative effect on believers. Maria Adeodata confesses that 'the Mass always moves me from the depths of sorrow to the heights of joy. I am shaken by the memory of a Cross, but then when I rise and go to receive the risen Christ himself in my own breast, I feel the victory of Love over death taking possession of my very flesh and my distorted bones.' What we pray, celebrate and believe in becomes the rule of life and and correct ethical choices: *lex orandi, lex celebrandi, lex credenda* lead to *lex vivendi*. Indeed, after he has washed the feet of the Twelve and explained this prophetic gesture, Jesus affirms in very clear terms: 'Now that you know this, blessed are you if you behave accordingly' (Jn 13:17). *Orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis* are complementary to each other. Fr Peter affirms this when he asks: 'Indeed, how can we build a community of love between us, except through sharing in the divine life communicated to us except through sharing in the divine life communicated to us in the Body of Christ himself?'

The eschatological dimension is also portrayed in the book. Maria Adeodata's precarious health puts her on the brink of life. She is nearly always in a state of ill-health. She knows that this present life is but a transient state in preparation for eternal life with the Trinity. Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-90), a contemporary of Blessed Maria Adeodata Pisani – albeit he lived to a ripe old age, unlike our mystic nun – loved to say it this way: 'The Church is the Trinity in exile; the Trinity is the Church at home'. These statements remind me of the Italian theologian Bruno Forte's (b.1949) texts



The crypt at St Peter's Monastery.

on ecclesiology. The Church is *ecclesia ex Trinitate* and journeys as the *ecclesia viatorum* to enjoy eternal life in the Trinity.

While frequently meditating upon death, Maria Adeodata's thoughts were on eternal life. Fr Peter narrates that 'her favourite place of personal prayer was the underground cemetery of the monastery, which she regularly haunted sometimes even up to 4.30 am. Some of the nuns came to regard her as the phantom of the crypt. She loved going to the crypt to thank the Lord for all the saintly nuns who had handed down the heritage of St Benedict. She saw her predecessors and in particular lady abbesses move in ghostly procession like the saints and sinners in pictures of the Last Judgement'. The communion of saints was very present in Maria Adeodata's reflections. She does not only think about St Clare and St Francis of Assisi and St Theresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, but also of the host of unnamed just ones who now enjoy the Beatific Vision. She feels that she is part of this spiritual bond. The author puts it this way: 'The great chain of saints of the Church constituted just one noble lineage into which she had been graciously adopted'.

It is amazing how a difficult and problematic family situation was to be transformed into a life of holiness in Maria Adeodata. I recall the late Archbishop Ġuzeppi Mercieca (1928-2016) exclaim, albeit to a restricted group of us in 2001: 'See how God works wonders. From a problem family and its unfertile terrain, a flower would bloom'. In the biography, Serracino Inglott affirms that, 'it is possible for a fulfilled personality, indeed sanctity, to flower in spite of a problematic upbringing in a broken family'. As if to confirm this, the same would be said by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (19 March 2016): 'The Synod's reflections show us that there is no stereo-type of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems. The situations that concern us are challenges' (par.57).

This biography, providentially unearthed ten years after it was composed, and six years after the author's death, proves to be a thought-provoking journey into the meanderings of the life of Blessed Maria Adeodata Pisani. It is no sugar-coated 'anecdote-full' text as we are often accustomed to read. Rather, it is a colourful and deep presentation of the life of the saint, a mirror image of the coral-hued thoughts of an eclectic author who successfully makes a convergence of the rays of light emanating from historical data, the social milieu, philosophy, theology, psychology, spirituality, the character traits of a nineteenth-century woman, and life in a monastery in the 'Silent City'. The result: *A Maria Adeodata whom we have come to realise we had not known well enough, if not sparsely.*

*Now, we know her better.
We can listen to her heartbeat.
We can hear her speak to us.*



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