



Reading through the narrative, one keeps discovering treasures of information which arise from simple facts or phrases used in the testimony about the saint. Whether it is a physical attribute about the saint, her way of behaving, her parental influences and other aspects that arise, Fr Peter makes the simple grow into an extraordinary insight into the spirituality of this saint which makes this biography such a pleasure to read.

From the preface by Carmel Zammit
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St Peter's Monastery
Triq Villegaignon
Mdina, Malta



Adeodata Pisani A Mystic Nun in Mdina

Peter Serracino Inglott



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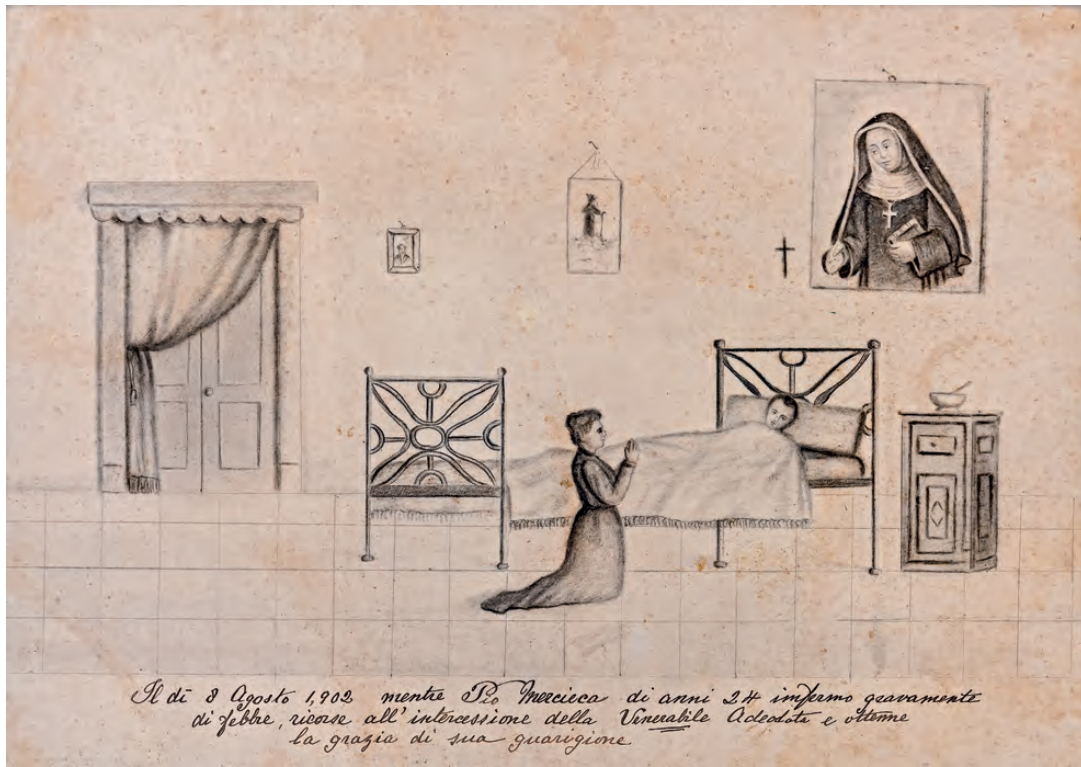
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Ex-voto drawing of 1902, praying for the intercession of Adeodata Pisani – St Peter's Monastery, Mdina.

Preface by the Author

This book, like Topsy and a few other things that fell into my hands, just grew; yet although it has grown up bigger than the pamphlet size it was originally intended to reach, it still does not pretend to be the full-scale biography of Adeodata Pisani that ought to be written after the required research has been carried out.

It contains instead a series of reconstructions of episodes of her life and of her reflections upon them. These reconstructions are entirely based upon a careful perusal of just two main sources: the testimony submitted in support of her canonization, and her own sparse writings.

Working through the testimony was, I confess, a chore. It was not recorded stenographically as delivered by the witnesses, but according to law practice: the substance of the testimony was recorded as reformulated by a juridical mind. Consequently, all the witnesses are made to express themselves in perfectly identical, dull and bureaucratic style.

Moreover, all of them give straight-jacketed replies to the same set of standard questions. They use exactly the same formulae for the same possibly many-sided phenomenon; for example, they say that one of Adeodata's shoulders was 'considerably defective' (*alquanto difettosa*) with the result that we never come to know exactly what was wrong with it.

By the grace of God, however, it is quite impossible to completely wipe out all the difference in self-expression, although the rapporteur in this case did the very best he could. So I tried, somewhat laboriously I must admit, to extract as much as I could of the suppressed colour that there was in the various refractions of Adeodata's personality in the prism of those who knew her personally.

At the same time, however, I sought never to allow my imagination to slip away from the moorings of what is implied by the witnesses, even if occasionally it is buried a little deeply in what they said. Naturally the witnesses sometimes contradict each other on small matters of detail or make blatant factual errors, but it is most of the time almost surprisingly easy to avoid being misled on this score.

Among Adeodata's writings there is one small work, the *Garden*, which I consider to be a micro masterpiece of spiritual writing and I have devoted several pages to its analysis because it has been so far poorly appreciated even by some of the most eminent promoters of Adeodata's cause.

I have been happy to not adopt a chronological sequence as the framework of my narrative. After all, one aim of the contemplative life is to transcend time. I have followed a theme of Adeodata's life in each chapter, while other themes run through a part and some others intertwine throughout the whole book.

Part One focuses on the two traits that appear to have marked Adeodata most strikingly in the eyes of her contemporaries: her use of the Maltese language and her unequal shoulders. It is suggested that these two apparently superficial traits are in fact emblematic of the inclusive spirituality and gentle lifestyle that are considered to have together constituted Adeodata's hallmark. The two traits also focus attention on her essential life task: the management of inheritance, whether in the form of assimilating an exogenous cultural patrimony, or in the form of changing the meaning of a physical factor of oneself.

Part Two focuses on Adeodata's Maltese father and her Italian mother. They were polar opposites in character and separated soon after their marriage. Adeodata shows it is possible for a fulfilled personality, indeed sanctity, to flower in spite of a problematic upbringing in a broken family. Her greatest spiritual achievement in the first 18 years of her life was perhaps that of learning how to deal with a burdensome family heritage in such a way as to turn it from a constricting into a liberating force.

Part Three is devoted to the passage from Neapolitan high society to an enclosed Maltese monastery. It is tempting to discern here a small-scale mirror image of Augustine's return from Italy to North Africa at the same time as he discovered the unison between finding God and finding himself. Adeodata's 'conversion' from subjection to the institutions of secular inheritance to the freedom of the recovery of its sacred roots, is followed by her promotion of the monastic heritage in its authentic Benedictine form.

Part Four summarizes Adeodata's doctrine and performance as a nun. Through trial and suffering, the horizon of her heritage opens up to infinity and her spirit broadens out to a literally catholic inclusiveness. In particular, she seeks to synthesize the Franciscan idea of total poverty and the Carmelite idea of mental prayer within the all-embracing Benedictine perspective of 'seeking God'.

In Part Five, her brief period as abbess, when she had to face the strong opposition of a few members of the community to her efforts to consolidate the return to a real cenobitic life, shows itself to have been a true apprenticeship and gently borne agony in preparation for her death and subsequent message of grace.

I have no training whatsoever as a hagiographer. I have not attempted anything like the scientific-historic scrutiny to which the life-stories of the saints in the Roman calendar have been subjected by the 'Bollandists', as the Jesuit initiators of scientific hagiography have become known since the seventeenth century and the results of whose endeavours are published in the *Acta Sanctorum*. But a close study of the *Positio*, including the *Garden*, have made me feel that I have come to know her almost as well as I know my sister and that I have learnt as much from her.

Followers of the Bollandist school of hagiography may well conclude, should they ever come to peruse my text, that the Blessed Adeodata Pisani I have written about does not exist, or exists as much as St Catherine and St George, an amalgam of reality and myth. They may attribute to my account of the Maltese nun just the sort or level of truth which fiction has. I claim that it is much more historically accurate than that.

Three successive versions of the Adeodata story were written. The first, the *Maltese Nun*, brought out as it were Adeodata's Pauline demonstration that God chooses the weak and makes them strong. It focused, like previous writers, on Adeodata more or less as a figure on her own, in whom there were surprising hidden depths.

If I may steal (rather than borrow, since I am taking it over without permission, adapting it and making it my own) a second-hand image, Adeodata's life appeared to be a dusty country road beneath the surface of which there flowed a hidden crystalline underground stream. Moreover, the flow of water was connected with the road above by occasional vertical channels. The course of the stream could, with a little effort, be charted either by the uncovering of

these vertical channels or, additionally, by the excavation of trenches at any point alongside the trajectory of the road. The condition and direction of the road could then be seen to have been subtly influenced all along by the movement of the water running generally unnoticed within the deeper, inner cavities of the earth.

The second sought to explore these depths, a 'secret life' of the kind for which Gregory the Great always retained nostalgia after he had to leave his monastery in order to be pope. The analysis of the *Garden* shows that Adeodata was fully conscious of the significance of her attempted incorporation of the two great institutional developments in the history of Western Christian spirituality into the Benedictine tradition. In the course of looking into Adeodata's life at this somewhat deeper level, it becomes clear that there is a cast of both friendly and adversarial characters who play a part that should not be ignored.

McClendon says: 'Confessional writing appears whenever a believer finds it necessary to take a stand against the dominant thought patterns of the day.'¹ Adeodata wanted to turn away from the dominant thought pattern that identifiable styles of spirituality were the heritage of individual religious tribes to that which considered any genuine form of spirituality to be part of the common heritage of all believers. Her gentle style led her, in the presentation of her beliefs, to eschew any hint of polemics or to claim ownership of the results of her thinking and experience.

The third revision, named 'Heiress', uncovered a still deeper line of continuity in Adeodata's life consisting in the process of extracting herself from the dominant earthly if not diabolic systems of property and power transmission, and entering more fully into another Pauline realization, that because we have become the adopted children of God, we have also become his legitimate heirs. This transformation Adeodata discovered at last was her divine destiny and her legacy to us.

I agree with McClendon that by scrutinizing the lifeworks of the finest human beings produced by our community, we can discover what God has been doing in our midst. This was indeed one of the central ideas that Adeodata intended to show in the *Garden*.

Peter Serracino Inglott, 2008