

A Passion for Unity

Is there not reason for surprise that in Italy it was first of all in a contemplative monastery, the Trappist house at Grottaferrata, that there developed a real interest in the movement for church unity at the time of its birth in the 1930s? We owe this above all to Mother Pia Gullini. In order to appreciate the exceptional nature of her personal stance and of her work, it is perhaps helpful to recall for a moment the atmosphere of the times:

Around the time of the nineteen-thirties, the polemic between Protestants and Catholics was not only lively but violent; both sides gave proof of ill will, often without regard for the rules of courtesy. There was very little real charity in the way the two parties constantly kept an acrimonious and suspicious eye on one another. Both sides often accused each other of bad faith or intolerance, and it was not infrequent that they called on secular authority to impose their own positions. To get an idea of this lamentable situation, one has only to look up issues of the revue Fides, published by the Pontifical Work for the Preservation of the Faith, an otherwise laudable journal run by an open and generous catholic. This latter, moreover, after initial contacts with the Trappist monastery, became an active supporter of ecumenism. Nevertheless, such was the cultural atmosphere and such were the mentalities. It was during these years that we began to pray at the Trappist monastery of Grottaferrata for unity among the churches, and all at once we became free of the traditional grudges, creating through prayer a new space for mutual agreement and understanding.⁽¹⁾

In her letters, Mother Pia wrote: *“I bring your attention to the great week of prayer for unity between the 18th and 25th of January. I urge you both to observe it wholeheartedly.” “As for the week, oh, what a need for prayer in order that Jesus might bring about this great miracle beyond human possibility!” “Union of Christian churches: a vast problem, enormous difficulties. How sad it would be, when you think of it, if God were not God.” “I give such importance to this great week. Give no respite either in heaven or on earth, in Italy or at the Vatican.”*

The desire for unity was part and parcel of the life and thought of Mother Pia. Into what circumstances was she born, how did she grow up? A brief presentation of who she was should suffice. Born in 1892, Maria Gullini was of a lively and indomitable nature. Her brilliant mind led her to such interests as music, painting, sports, language studies. She received an excellent education in the French manner under the Sisters of the Sacred Heart at Venice.

Her mother’s example of deep faith evinced in her a desire for true humility. At thirteen years of age she stated: *“To insure that I become humble, I would go so far as to shut myself up in the cloister.”* She had experience of worldly life during her adolescence at Rome where her father held an important position in the Ministry of Communications. Her mother, however, had no fear for her with regard to the perils of worldly living: if her activities included horse riding at the Villa Borghese, skating, attending the theatre or balls at the royal court, she went with her to Mass each day and faithfully attended catechism classes in two Roman parishes.

Even though, according to arrangements made between the two families, she agreed to be engaged to a young engineer, in 1915 and 1916 she sensed a growing desire to consecrate her life to God. She came to experience the vanity of life and had a glimpse of the suffering the world brings. She was sure that God alone could bring her relief. She frequently visited the Little Sisters of the Assumption and along with them provided assistance to the poor in their homes. In December of 1916, having broken off for good from her fiancé, at the time a military officer on the front, she requested entrance into the Congregation of the Assumption. The superior advised her to make a retreat under the direction of a monk, Dom Norbert Sauvage, Procurator of the Order of Trappists. Four months later, in spite of the opposition of her confessor and of all her loved ones, Marie, at the age of 25, entered the Trappistine monastery of Laval in France, one of the very first abbeys of the female branch of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, well-known for the calibre of its observance. With her passionate temperament, her broad and profound intelligence, she had “let herself be captivated” by the God made man, as she herself put it.

She was a lover of poverty and austerity, her inclination towards all that is good rendering her a stranger to any kind meanness or mediocrity. She had kept her gift for music and painting hidden from everyone and it was only by chance that they were found out. When made novice director for the lay-sisters, she communicated in a simple and spontaneous way the fire burning within her, for she had the gift of inflaming hearts. When her superiors asked her to go to Grottaferrata, a poor community from every point of view, she could only say: "a sacrifice is never to be refused... I'll go wherever God call me." She arrived in Italy in 1926 where she became abbess of the community in 1931. Her abbatial term was decisively important both for the community's future and for her own growth in sanctity: this included trials, periods of darkness, fatigue. She was able to lead the community with intelligence and discernment, giving new impetus in an somewhat prophetic way. By placing the Eucharist at the centre of everything, she opened vast new horizons for the spiritual life.

She loved her sisters with a love that was both tender and demanding, being attentive to the physical and moral necessities of each. While showing patience in the face of each one's human limitations, she was uncompromising when it came to self-seeking. She expected of her daughters the same humility, trust, self-forgetfulness and gratitude toward God that she herself practised.

Mother Pia must have been carrying her passion for Christian unity within her heart ever since her years at Laval before 1929, but the visit paid her at Grottaferrata in 1933 by Henriette Ferray, a French professor, was a decisive moment in her life. It was then that she found out about the ecumenical ideal that was gaining such astonishing force in France: for her this was a revelation. From a moving passage composed for a memorial card at the time of her death, one gathers that from 1934 on, she had explicitly offered her life for Christian unity. By her passion for church unity, Mother Pia awakened other souls who were open to ecumenism. In 1936, Father Paul Couturier, the great apostle for the spiritual ecumenical movement, for the first time sent Grottaferrata his preparation pamphlet for the week of prayer for Christian unity, which Mother Pia made known to her community. Father Couturier evoked a number of lay people and religious who had offered their lives to God for the sake of the gift of unity. One of the older nuns, Mother Immacolata Scavini, upon reading this interpreted it as something the Lord was proposing to her personally. Having made this offering, the Lord called her to Himself a few months later. In January 1938, Mother Pia once again reminded her sisters of Father Couturier's invitation, producing this time an unexpected echo in the heart of a young Sardinian sister, the 23 year old Sister Maria Gabriella Sagheddu. She also felt urged to offer her young life for the great cause of unity. Her offering, accepted by the Lord, was very quickly fulfilled: Sister Maria Gabriella succumbed to tuberculosis on 23 April, 1939.

The signs that accompanied this death led Mother Pia to make her offering known in spite of reticence and opposition on the part of many. Articles by Msgr. Francia and Mr. Giordani, followed by the publication of a biography by Giovanna Dore, which very quickly went through six editions, made "the little sister" known throughout Italy and elsewhere as well. In 1941, Father Couturier presented Maria Gabriella as "*a marvellous worker for Unity*" and stated, "*She has crowned spiritual ecumenism.*" The passion for unity that put Mother Pia in touch with Father Couturier, with the abbey of Nashdom (now Elmore), with Brother Roger Schultz and many others occasioned an extensive correspondence and brought visitors flocking to the monastery: intellectuals and others who were attracted by her prophetic genius. She would present herself at the grille of the parlour, tall, distinguished, delicate of profile, a person of great refinement. Those who came to visit her were immediately aware that, thanks to her intuition and acumen, she encountered them at the depths of their soul and accompanied them along their spiritual path. Her vivacity, her culture and her broad views attracted people and moved them to admiration. Drawing near to her, one discovered, as it were, a living image of the Church, which gave those of other confessions a sense of having found unity in this heart so at harmony with the heart of Christ. Following Mary's example, she gave birth to Jesus in souls, opening them up to the living Church, to the mystical body of the Lord.

She was not always understood within her own Order: *“To see you at work in all things,”* she wrote, *“O my God ‘qui facis mirabilia,’ is a pleasant duty for us and a joy for you, O Father. But to keep certain marvels secret is certainly worth much more, shows greater purity and humility than making them public. I will tell of them in silence, with love, awaiting your ‘hour’ in adoration and prayer for the great cause close to your heart, the unity of your Church... May we always be able to accept joyfully that on the scale of our love for Sister Maria Gabriella’s cause be placed also prudence, distrust, the reserve of our Order and of its highest officials. Thus we will obtain the perfect balance between the two sides of the scale and the certainty that we are placing there the least possible of ourselves.”*⁽²⁾ In December 1940, she was asked to resign before the end of her third three-year term. This did not create problem: free and disinterested, Mother Pia simply kept her sights forward, doing what she had to without worrying about criticism, being able to withdraw into the background in a natural way when asked to. Elected once again in 1946, her fascinating and charismatic personality drew an increasing number of ecumenical contacts. Dom Benedict Ley of Nashdom abbey visited Grottaferrata in 1947, also meeting with Msgr. Montini, Msgr. Penitenti, Father Charles Boyer, Mr. Iginio Giordani and other supporters of ecumenism. Many Anglicans visited Grottaferrata thereafter. Mother Pia also established frequent contact with the community of Taizé: *“I am very close to the Brothers of Taizé whose young founder came to Grotta in 1950 with his mother and Brother Max (the great theologian of the community). They visited Sister Maria Gabriella’s tomb.”*⁽³⁾ Her correspondence with Mrs. Schultz, Brother Roger’s mother, continued for many years.

After five more years as abbess, another serious crisis arose in 1951. Mother Pia was forced once again to resign and sent away from her monastery with practically no forewarning. The underlying reasons for this removal remain unclear, but her ecumenical activities certainly had something to do with it. Mother Pia was sent to the abbey of La Fille-Dieu in Switzerland. In her first letter as an exile, she wrote: *“This is God’s moment: one can either glorify God and gain from it, or do a lot of human reasoning...a total loss. To believe, to think of Him without claiming to understand, and to wait for Him with much humble trust inspired by love...”*⁽⁴⁾ Her seeming failure in leading her community, in her ecumenical concerns, in planning a second Trappist foundation in Italy more in conformity with the demands of her own ideals, never upset her inner peace. She remained in abandonment to God’s will, driven only by her desire for a life of charity: *“The more I draw near to my end, the more everything becomes unified for me: for us, as for any community or people, it is love that matters, love that is union and mutual openness.”* *“What peace there is in recognizing one’s nothingness, and yet a nothingness in His hands ! True love means suffering for Him: what makes us suffer is the part of ourselves that remains in us. Little by little, however, we suffer more and more from what makes Him suffer, but such suffering is deep joy, worth more than any other joy.”*⁽⁵⁾

Throughout the years of her exile, Mother Pia continued to be engaged in ecumenism, especially with regard to various translations of Sister Maria Gabriella’s biography. She also gave assistance to various authors who wanted to write new biographies, in particular Gaston Zananiri, a lawyer in Cairo who would later enter the Dominican Order.

Concerning Mother Pia, the nuns of La Fille-Dieu recall the following:

“For more than eight years, the Lord graced us with the presence of this great religious who, though exceptionally gifted, was nevertheless a fine example of simplicity and discretion. We were deeply touched by her profound humility, her ardent charity, her constant gratitude toward God and neighbour (a “walking Te Deum” as one of the older sisters put it), her heroic obedience, her spirit of prayer, her total abandonment to God’s holy will. We loved her as if she had always belonged to our community.”⁽⁶⁾

Yet she herself was not to see the fruit of her intense life. When she was called back to Italy, she arrived in Rome sick and was taken directly to the hospital. She made no mention either of the past or the future to those who came to visit her at the Polyclinic, nor did she exhibit any feelings of satisfaction about being called back to the monastery in view of taking on

responsibilities. Nevertheless, everyone considered her return as a kind of rehabilitation ! Suffering from bone marrow cancer in the spinal column, she died suddenly of heart failure on 29 April, 1959, at 67 years of age. She foresaw her death and the impossibility of seeing Vitorchiano where the Grottaferrata community had moved in 1957. She was to arrive there in a coffin on 30 April, the first to be buried in the cemetery.

Mother Pia was not to return alive to the community for which she had dedicated her life; she was not to see the progress of ecumenical dialogue as fostered by the Council; she was not to be present at the 1983 beatification of Sister Maria Gabriella; she was not to see the foundation she had so desired; but in the years following her death, the community she had formed gave birth to six new monastic communities in Italy, Latin America and Asia.

Mother Pia was a prophet and precursor of unity, living out her personal charisma within the great spiritual tradition of Cistercian monasticism. She drew attention to the deepest and most fundamental ideas of the ecumenical movement which was then in its earliest stages, most especially the sharing of spiritual gifts over and above the confrontation of theological convictions. In 1948 she wrote to a French woman who had authored a biography of Sister Maria Gabriella: "Concerning the outline of the book... I can speak quite frankly... many years of experience with this problem of Reunion, i.e. letters, visits and publications following the appearance of the book on Sister Maria Gabriella, have led me to see that the book's success is due (besides the will of God, without which it would never have been written) to the fact that it does not get enmeshed in the controversy. Those who are unaware of the problem come to understand it through the example of Sister Maria Gabriella, while those who know it well find in this same example an unspeakable repose, a soothing light and, as it were, a new horizon inclining them to love rather than discussion. It is the heart that inclines the intelligence to submission... When one wants agreement, one is already prepared—without much discussion, and even avoiding it—to accept the conditions for unity of doctrine and government implied in "Reunion" and of which Catholics and Protestants alike are well aware. It is from this friendly standpoint that Catholics and Protestants must set out—as brothers—in order to find a meeting point."⁽⁷⁾

Interiorly unified by love and suffering, attentive to the Holy Spirit and led by Him towards full truth, and at a time when the ecumenical dialogue was only just beginning, Mother Pia lived out and taught the fundamental Christian attitude: to reach out to the other, to try to understand him, loving him and respecting him as a "brother." By her welcome and her friendship, by her prayer and sacrifice and with the great heart of a woman, she was able to live out the ecumenical ideal and to help others live it out as well.

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⁽¹⁾ E. Francia, *Lettere e scritti di madre Pia*, Roma 1971, pp. 31-32.

⁽²⁾ An undated personal note.

⁽³⁾ Letter of 19 September, 1958.

⁽⁴⁾ Letter of 3 May, 1951.

⁽⁵⁾ Letters of 23 November, 1951 and 9 May, 1952.

⁽⁶⁾ *Collectanea Cisterciensia*, 1960, p. 42.

⁽⁷⁾ Letter of 28 April, 1948.