



Blessed Maria Teresa Scrylli

**From the school of life
to the school of holiness**

**Letter of the Prior General,
Fr. Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm.
to the Carmelite Family**

Sanctity: Walking with God

1. On 8 October 2006 in Fiesole (Florence), Venerable Mother Maria Teresa Scrylli (1825-1889), the founder of *The Institute of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, will be officially beatified. She will be the latest sister added to the flock of saints, blessed, and martyrs, who from the beginning, have lived and embodied the charism of Carmel and its spirituality in various ways of life.

By a happy coincidence, Mother Scrylli came from an Italian Region, Tuscany, and from one of the oldest places in Italy, where the first hermits of Mount Carmel chose to settle in the west, following their forced departure from the Holy Land in the thirteenth century. (Pisa 1249) She was also from a diocese, Fiesole, part of the civil province of Florence, which had already produced illustrious members of the Carmelite Family such as the Bishop and Pastor, Andrea Corsini (1303?-1374) and the famous Florentine mystic Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi (1566-1607).

These outstanding examples of sanctity are now joined by the educator, Maria Teresa Scrylli, who enriches the Carmelite charism with new perspectives and shows that it can be lived in a variety of ways.

2. It is true that the universal call to sanctity is «one» in the Church, as life in union with Christ, however, this must be cultivated according to one's own personal vocation, as *Lumen Gentium* reminds us: «The classes and duties of life are many, but holiness is one that sanctity which is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God, and who obey the voice of the Father and worship God the Father in spirit and in truth. These people follow the poor Christ, the humble and cross-bearing Christ in order to be worthy of sharing in His glory. Every person must walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties in the path of living faith, which arouses hope and works through charity» (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 41). This call to sanctity, even today, is a vocation to be announced to everyone, an invitation from God to walk with Him, a journey which must become the heart of life's personal endeavours for every believer. Moreover, as John Paul II recalls in *Novo millennium ineunte*, when he sets out a pastoral program for the third millennium in the life of the Church: «The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard of ordinary Christian living*: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction. It is also clear however that the paths to holiness are personal and call for a genuine "training in holiness", adapted to people's needs» (*Novo millennium ineunte*, n. 31).

In her exemplary journey with God, which demonstrated the sanctity of her life, Mother Scilli showed a path that may be summed up in the phrase «from the school of life to the school of holiness», on account of the characteristics she showed in her vocation to Carmel and as an educator.

The Life of Mother Scilli

3. Maria Scilli was born 15 May 1825 at a time that witnessed great economic, political and cultural transformations in the whole of Europe. No state or region could avoid these changes and Tuscany was no exception. The election to the pontifical throne of Pius IX in June 1846 and the reforms he granted to the Pontifical State, caused a chain reaction which first involved, among others, the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Entire populations were on the move to find national independence. Above all, in this climate of political ferment, Maria Scilli grew up and matured in her spiritual, mystical exaltations.

Her family had a place by no means secondary in the society of Montevarchi, and for work-related reasons, rubbed shoulders with its most prominent members. However, Maria small in stature, with a sensitive character and of extraordinary intelligence, felt early on, her mother's indifference for having produced a daughter, and her preference for the first-born who was given much greater attention and affection. To this hardness of the maternal heart, Maria responded with much greater affection, and began to trace the way which she would meet the deepest human and spiritual trials: not with rebellion, but with trust and abandonment to God by whom she felt completely loved and to whom she had completely devoted herself from a tender age. This love would mould her into an open and vivacious person, but also one sensitive and attentive to others, with an ability to radiate joy and serenity around her.

4. A mysterious illness kept Maria Scilli bed-ridden for almost two years and she was miraculously cured through the intercession of the martyr S. Fiorenzo. It was during her convalescence in the country that she perceived God's call to a life of complete devotion to Him.

On 28 May 1846, contrary to the will of her parents, she entered the monastery of St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi in Florence, attracted by the example and the spirituality of the Florentine mystic, but at the same time as she stepped into the «blessed, and for me, dearest beloved walls», she

sensed rejection. «One day, while praying, I asked Him to deem me worthy to know His will, for it seemed that my spirit had been transported into the world to indicate the many creatures that He was waiting for to come to him. I do not know if this was something caused by a great restlessness or agitation, or a seeking for consolation; or perhaps in reality, it was God's work which would be confirmed by whatever followed» (*Autobiography*, 52). In these words we can see the drama the young woman lived in those two months spent in the monastery. She loved the cloister, but she felt God did not want her there and this was confirmed by a sister who had died in the odour of sanctity. The sister prophesized the suffering she would go through: «Much, but very much He wants from you, He will give you the outpouring of drink for the soul of extraordinary bitterness ... Oh, daughter! You will go through great suffering: saying this she would squeeze my hand, demonstrating great sentiment. I would remain silent offering myself to God for any suffering that would please Him» (*Autobiography*, 49) Before returning to Montevarchi, she became a Third Order Carmelite taking the name of Maria Teresa of Jesus.

5. Upon her return to the village, some families began to entrust their daughters to her and she would give them regular lessons. The number of scholars was in continual increase and so as not to deprive her parents of their freedom, she decided, together with her companions who shared with her the practice of piety, that a space that was able to accommodate them was necessary. This was the starting point for her future work of foundation. During one of his pastoral visits, the Bishop of Fiesole, Mgr. Francesco Bronzuoli, wanted to meet, encourage her, and offer his support. «In this way, I started seeing the path of assistance opening up to me, for what would be dictated would come from God's love and from my similar love» (*Autobiography*, 68).

While she was looking for a location to start this project that was taking shape, she received a request from the town council to take over the running of a School for Girls. She was advised to accept and with the obedient spirit for which she was always noted, she accepted. This commitment marked the beginning of the Institute in the village, but also its end.

6. The Institute was born in a period of insurrection in the unification of Italy. This political situation, characterised by a climate that was most definitely anti-clerical and hostile, particularly towards female religious life, crushed the newly born venture as soon as it had opened and was already bearing fruit. The anti-clericalism and the freemasonry, present in the political class of Montevarchi, was so strong that her friends became her enemies, and on 30 November 1859, by order of the Royal Government, the Institute was ordered to be dissolved, rendering the school, the location, and the occupants free and secularized. Even the community of Foiano, the second house of the Institute, was also obliged to disband, and to discontinue the use of the religious habit, even though the population rebelled against the departure of the sisters from the village. Mother Maria Teresa used every possible means to save the Institute, but all attempts proved useless, due to an accumulation of interests and because of the ambivalent behaviour of the Montevarchi authorities.

Following the forced dissolution of the two communities and after a lengthy period of silent waiting, lasting approximately fifteen years, Mother moved to Florence where, with the blessing of the Archbishop, Mgr. Eugenio Cecconi, and the assistance of some of her old companions, Mother Maria would rebuild the community. It was 18 March 1878. The school, the boarding house, a Marian association, parish catechism, visits to the sick, were occupying all their days and vocations were growing. Everything was moving ahead, but the untimely deaths of several sisters, in a short time reduced the numbers to the point that at death of Mother Maria Teresa Scilli, 14 November 1889,

the community would be only two sisters, one novice and one postulant.

7. Mother Scilli would not have the joy of seeing her Institute flower. «Hiding with Christ in God», she would imprint with her renunciation and—humanly speaking—with her defeat, the real spirituality of the Institute: the total offering to the primacy of God and His word, which as St. Albert's Rule, the source of Carmel's charism, reminds us is the complete availability of self to the Church and to the community. This particular feature of her behaviour can be found in some of her expressions that make up a prayer «of the secret place within the heart», showing a glimpse of the grammar of her «interior Gospel» and that leads to the true knowledge of life: «I love You, oh my God, in your gifts; I love You, in my nothingness, also this I understand, Your infinite hope: I love You in the most varied and extraordinary vicissitudes, in the way You accompany me...I love you in all things, whether in suffering, or in peace; since I do not seek You, nor have I ever sought Your consolation; but only You, God of consolation.

Therefore, I have never gloried nor ever taken pleasure in that which you have allowed me to experience of your Divine Love through Your gratuitous grace. Nor have I ever been anxious or worried when left in dryness and emptiness» (*Autobiography*, 62).

On 1 May 1888, through God's mysterious plan, Clementina Mosca of Osimo, entered as a boarding student, and is considered co-founder of the Institute to all intents and purposes. She also had a vocation for the cloister, but on the death of Mother Maria Teresa, the Prioress of the monastery where Mother Maria Teresa had entered, communicated this news, saying to the young women that her place was with the Carmelites. However, Sr. Maria Mosca became the Superior of the Institute, and with her it reflowered and was reinvigorated with numerous vocations and foundations. Sr. Maria Mosca gave the Institute a new name «The Institute of Our Lady of Mount Carmel», obtaining affiliation to the Carmelite Order in 1929 and Pontifical approval by Decree on 27 February 1933. On her death the Institute counted 41 houses and its principal aim of education had been greatly enriched, together with other charitable activities.

The Institute Today

8. Today the Institute numbers approximately 250 Sisters distributed in 40 communities in Italy, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Israel, Poland, Canada, the Philippines, the United States, and the Czech Republic. At the beginning of the First World War, assistance to the sick was added to the existing activities of education, catechesis and parish work. The Sisters also work in rest-homes for the aged, where the same love and kindness for all is shown and which characterized the life of Mother Maria Teresa Scilli.

The Value of Her Spirituality

9. For personal reasons and by her vocation, Mother Mary Teresa is profoundly connected to Carmelite spirituality. She only stayed a short time in the monastery of St. Mary Magdalene, but she discovered and deepened her Carmelite vocation which could be lived in the world through apostolic activities. Therefore, she entered the Carmelite Third Order. Sr. Mary Teresa's contact with the Fathers of the Discalced Carmelites of Saint Paul, Florence, helped her in this sense. The beginning of the Institute was marked by a spirit of fervour, by the prayer of the Order itself and by a spirit of contemplation which always remained alive in her. Her prayers were completely full of total abandon, confidence and total openness to the will of the Divine. They had an aspect of reparation for the offences inflicted upon God, of praise, of the joy of spending time with God, of union and of profound faith in God in trials and temptations. This was completely in line with the

notable experiences of the soul of the contemplative Carmelite, from whom Mother Scilli took the name of Teresa. Wanting to follow in particular the steps of the Saint of Avila: «...and persevering in this holy exercise, I have much faith in the mercy of God that no one has ever had in vain, already mental prayer for me is nothing more than an intimate relationship of friendship, frequent one-to-one conversation with the one whom we know loves us» (*Life of S. Teresa of Jesus*, 8,5).

10. The desire for God was strong in Mother Scilli from an early age. She put it into practice with prayer, but also by making her life always conform to the will of God in every situation and from a very young age this became her life's program. «Father, by myself I can do nothing; and even if I could, I would not want to, because I desire nothing except that your will be done in me and regarding me... *voluntas tua. Fiat*» (*Autobiography*, 90). This is the 'golden thread' that runs through Mother Scilli's entire life: a trusting abandonment to God and total, unconditional obedience to his will. «I will always repeat: *Fiat*».

Embracing the will of God is not a passive way of living; on the contrary it implies a certain dynamism in knowing and putting that will into practice. It means questioning oneself and giving of oneself. It means being no longer for oneself, but for the Other and for others, because it comes from love. For Maria Scilli full openness to the will of God and total love for Him is seen concretely in bringing souls to Him. «We are on this earth to do the will of God and bring souls to Him» (*Constitutions, 1854-1855*, n. 7).

Confidence and total abandonment to God, made her meek and humble. If in infancy meekness was almost a natural trait, over the years, she developed it consciously one moment at a time. She saw herself as «gold in the hands of the goldsmith, and wax in the hand of the candle maker, open to take whatever form pleased him» (*Autobiography*, 45). She did not love glory but the good, and «conscious of my own shortcomings, I am constantly amazed that God has placed me in the position he has. If this is what he wished, it is for this same reason that I question it. If I do not understand it, it must be due more to his efforts than mine, since I have done nothing good of myself, not being capable of it» (*Autobiography*, 97).

11. In Mother Maria Teresa's spirituality, following God is fundamental. This is seen in the gruelling way of the cross that she began from her childhood and which she embraced with the desire only to make reparation for those offences which had been committed against Him. Her writings expressed, in a simple way, a profound wisdom, centred on the mystery of the cross. Her moral sufferings and loneliness was often accompanied by illness, but this did not prevent her from offering herself continuously to God until *consummatum est*. She tried to offer everything for love and with love: «For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake» (*Phil. 1:29*) Maria Scilli believed and suffered, reminding us that no cross is without meaning and that every cross which is taken up brings a maturity to life. She showed that serving the Lord brings freedom and that faith in him makes us able to be fraternal and to share. «In prayer, considering the way God has been offended, my pain was so great that I asked him with great insistence to let me suffer. In this way, by making myself his victim, I wanted to make it up to him. I wanted to please him, in contrast to all the displeasures that he had received from all those who had offended him so ungratefully» (*Autobiography*, 61).

Maria Scilli's love for suffering and her desire to make up for all the offences that had been committed against God were nourished by her frequent meditation on the Passion of Christ that she had developed from her childhood, when she had heard in a sermon that «those souls who carried the cross for God, were dear to Him. Love and suffer, suffer and love. These two things go together: love makes us suffer and suffering makes us love», says

St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi (*Ricordi detti e azioni, Renovazione della Chiesa*, 326). Mother Scilli suffered for love and wanted those who came near to her, to have the joy of knowing that God loves with a Father's love, that the cross has meaning, that what counts most is not appearance, but the uprightness of conscience.

The Charism of the Institute

12. The tenacious, yet humble and silent story of Maria Scilli unfolded during the complex events surrounding the unification of Italy: anti-clerical and anti-religious liberalism and the triumph of the industrial revolution. She devoted her attention to one of the gravest problems of that society, namely the lack of educational opportunities especially for the poor. She offered young women a rounded education that would prepare them for dignified employment and an independent life. From this viewpoint, one can understand the educational and contemplative charism that Mother Scilli embraced, lived and transmitted to her daughters. She believed that she had found her vocation in a Carmelite cloistered monastery, but then came to understand that, without lessening any of the demands of a contemplative life, she could engage in education, which was «leaving God for God, that is leaving God in the contemplation of Magdalene to find God again in the fulfilment of one's own personal duties, following the example of Martha... What a grace to leave the enjoyment of God in order to expend one's energies in His service and then to return to rest in Him» (*Autobiography*, 37).

The interconnection between mysticism and action was a necessary part of the Carmelite vocation for Mother Scilli. The example of the two sisters, Martha and Mary, cannot be separated, and the ideal of the charism of her Institute consists in the unity between contemplation and action, and therefore there must be no dualism between love for God and love for others.

Being contemplative and educators at the same time is the task that Mother Maria Teresa Scilli gave her community, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit: «The contemplative life cannot but help our activity, and never damages it». The «contemplative active» life is «similar to the way Jesus lived», to whom the sisters who are teachers must go for guidance and help in order to walk «that way of charity, that He, the Divine Master taught» (*Constitutions 1854-55*, n. 7).

13. For each person who loves Christ, and as the Rule of St. Albert prescribes, the heart and centre of Mother Scilli's existence was the Eucharist, «the most divine bread», that from early on she received every day. Often when she was in church, on the other side from the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, she experienced being drawn by the Lord. «I felt attracted with no strength to resist, and sometimes I found myself in the chapel without even being aware of how I got there» (*Autobiography*, 32). Sometimes, on entering the church, she felt as if an invisible hand took her by the heart: «It was a loving embrace that enraptured my soul. I took refuge at the same instant (or perhaps I was attracted by Him) in the Sacred Host, from where I felt the wound of love vibrating» (*Autobiography*, 36). Mother Scilli was very aware of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, but also in herself, and so the experience of the divine presence became constant.

14. Her devotion to Our Lady was strong and tender. This was no alienating and unreal devotion but an experience of profound familiarity. The experience of Mary's presence grew from her prayer, and became more profound also in daily life. She expressed this devotion in very affectionate ways, finding in Mary comfort and joy. It reached a peak in her great desire to be with Our

Lady in heaven. This Marian and very Carmelite experience introduced Mother Scrilli to the mysticism of the Passion, as her love for Mary «began to make suffering sweet for me». Her «dear mother» allowed Mother Scrilli to experience her care and the sweetness of her love. The relationship with Our Lady was very much that of child to mother and the Institute was placed under her protection from the very beginning. Relating to the Virgin Mary as a real person who is present to us, we can become aware of her maternal and continuous presence throughout the activities of the day and throughout the hours of night.

Mother Scrilli gave great importance to the name «Maria» which she received at baptism, rather than Palmira as her parents had desired. She believed that the fact her godmother forgot her original name was an inspiration from heaven and «I was very grateful to bear the name of she whom I loved and still love, as my dear Mother» (*Autobiography*, 2).

The role of education

15. The apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata* reminds us that «The history of the Church, from antiquity down to our day, is full of admirable examples of consecrated persons who have sought and continue to seek holiness through their involvement in education, while at the same time proposing holiness as the goal of education. Indeed, many of them have achieved the perfection of charity through teaching. This is one of the most precious gifts which consecrated persons today can offer to young people, instructing them in a way that is full of love, according to the wise counsel of St. John Bosco: Young people should not only be loved, but should also know that they are loved» (VC, n. 96). Mother Scrilli was also inspired by a similar educational spirituality, and she had the opportunity more than once of meeting St. John Bosco. She added also other elements that she proposed above all to her daughters, but anyone who is involved in the field of education could use them with profit. Mother Scrilli bore heroic witness to Christian hope and to the capacity to rise above pain. Her example invites us to consider education as a service and its method being entering into personal relationships with those we are trying to serve.

16. The main apostolic work of Maria Scrilli's Institute was to be the education of youth, especially the poorest, «from the youngest age to the end of adolescence». For this reason the sisters were required to add a fourth vow to the three customary vows. This fourth vow was to «give oneself to the service of one's neighbour by means of Christian and civil moral instruction to girls and young women» (*Rule and Constitutions*, 1854-55, n. 1).

The sisters involved in education were required to possess a number of gifts: charity, kindness, an ability to listen, self-denial, self-giving, and real interest in each pupil. In this way educational establishments would be permeated by the spirit of the Gospel (cfr. VC, n. 96).

In creative fidelity in the Church and in the Carmelite Family

17. Mother Scrilli gave her life to others in Christ, and this example demonstrates to us all how to be holy and how to «build a new civilisation based on love»; a civilisation of men and women who welcome the gift of God, and respond without measure to God's infinite love until every aspect of human life is transformed in God. One does not become a saint by cutting oneself off from the world and ignoring it, but it is precisely by seeing with the eyes of God and in loving with the heart of God that saints today are formed. This spirituality takes as a starting point the great commandment of love and seeks to make this love a reality in the concrete situations of daily life

because «God is love». Pope Benedict XVI took this as his theme in his first encyclical: «God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him (1 Jn 4,16). These words from the first letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny. In the same verse, Saint John offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: We have come to know and believe in the love God has for us» (*Deus caritas est*, n. 1).

18. The times in which Mother Scrilli lived are in some respects not dissimilar from our own days, especially with regard to the question of faith. The dialogue between believers and non-believers is one of the greatest challenges to our culture that is marked by unbelief and religious indifference. As believers and as Church, we are invited to accept this challenge and to live our faith without fear, trusting in the faithfulness of God. Mother Scrilli has left us an example of how to respond to our call to follow Christ as individuals and as the Family of Carmel. There are two particular elements that emerge strongly: witness and dialogue.

19. Bearing witness means to live the truth in love. The witness of love is contagious but does not force; it is not oppressive but is patient and kind, «it does not lack respect, nor seek its own interest, it does not become angry, nor does it take into account any hurt received, nor take pleasure in injustice, but rejoices in the truth» (1 Cor. 13, 5-6). «The evangelical witness which the world finds most appealing is that of concern for people and of charity towards the poor, the weak, and those who suffer. The complete generosity underlying this attitude and these actions stands in marked contrast to human selfishness. It raises precise questions which lead to God and to the Gospel. A commitment to peace, justice, human rights and human promotion is also a witness to the Gospel when it is a sign of concern for persons and is directed toward integral human development» (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 42). However, «practical activity will always be insufficient, unless it visibly expresses a love for humanity, a love nourished by an encounter with Christ. My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to rove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift» (*Deus caritas est*, 34). A message such as that of the Gospel, which proclaims that God is Love, that God has loved us to the point of becoming one of us and giving up his life for us, and who wants us to participate in his communion of life in the Spirit, cannot use any force or impose itself on others; it cannot be involved in violence of any sort. Mother Scrilli is a witness to the Gospel beatitude: «Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth» (Mt 5,5), that is the Kingdom of God, not only as an eschatological reality, but also a present reality in the life of every believer. We seek to follow the example of the Master: «Learn from me who am meek and humble of heart». Meekness is a fruit of the Spirit (cfr. Gal 5,12), who creates communion among people with real human relationships because «the meek with enjoy great peace» (Ps 37,11).

20. The second element is dialogue. By «dialogue» we mean a way to seek the truth by listening to the opinions of others, frank discussion and the exchange of ideas.

Every fundamentalist position regarding the truth is incompatible with dialogue. Notwithstanding the difficulty of joining dialogue with the work of evangelisation, the Church categorically affirms that «dialogue is a path towards the Kingdom and will certainly bear fruit, even if the times and seasons are known only to the Father» (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 57). The example of Mother Scrilli is a stimulus to educational institutions of Christian inspiration, so that they become places where the faith is passed on, studied

and celebrated. In this way they can create an environment in which the Gospel of Christ can nourish young people.

The message of the Gospel gives to the Church the possibility of offering an alternative model for human life. The Christian community can play a critical role in regard to the clear dehumanisation of people and faced with the imbalance of the present system of globalisation. This is possible only when we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and the centre of the life of the believer. Mother Scilli never retreated when faced with the denial of God, intolerance or fundamentalism and remained true to the gift she had received from God for her own life and for her Institute.

The entire Carmelite Family today can thank the Lord for the beatification of Mother Scilli, and for the sign that Carmelite spirituality still possesses a fruitfulness and creativity, which flowers in holiness of life. All Carmelites can see in Mother Scilli an example of creative fidelity to the Carmelite charism and to the patrimony of her Institute, witnessed to in all sorts of new situations because «the saints are the true bearers of light within history, for they are men and women of faith, hope and love» (*Deus caritas est*, n. 40).

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Prior General**

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