

**A reflection on Pierina Gilli's practices of Christian and sacramental life and on the sacramental aspects of Montichiari's message, in particular on the common priesthood and intercession.**

*By Edward McNamara LC*

After reading the diaries, and the other dossiers concerning the figure of Pierina Gilli, I think I can affirm these essential points:

The significant normality of Pierina Gilli's sacramental life and devotional practices is remarkable. We certainly see that she had a rich life of sacramental piety: Mass and daily communion whenever possible, regular confession about every 15 days according to the testimonies of those who were close to her, and participation in adoration, processions and other activities of popular piety.

That said, however, there are no exaggeration or strange elements in her piety. I believe that from the point of view of external practice, many things would have been relatively common in other men and women of the time, whether they were simple believers or members of Catholic Action and other similar groups.

But to say that he had a "normal" life of piety is not to diminish the depth of her inner life. In fact, these are the principal means of sanctification that the Church herself proposes to all faithful Catholics.

Something similar can be said about the practices that have arisen from the revelations which, in general, fall within fairly well-known categories and types and do not arouse surprise or perplexity. I will try to return to these later.

Before going into this matter, however, I would like to touch on a theme that has caused perplexity in some people. The statement contained in the "Personal Secret" that we find in the writings of 13-1-1948:

Secret that the Blessed Virgin, Mystical Rose, gave me, and she said to me:

"I have chosen you as a priest, mother of religious souls, of whom my Divine Son Jesus in that Holy Communion (16-9-47 [Diary 69-70]) truly left in you a part of his Most Holy Humanity. May this, that is, be a secret comfort to all religious souls, especially priests; those who really live this spirit of faith are participants."

In the Lord Dev.ma Gilli Pierina Montichiari 13-1-1948"

It should first be noted that the expression "I have chosen you as a priest" does not seem to have anything to do with the claims for the female priesthood. Nothing in Pierina Gilli's other writings or in her life would suggest such an interpretation. Moreover, the secret also clearly distinguishes between religious souls and priests as the subject of comfort.

It is also remarkable that the secret combines having been chosen as a priest with being chosen as the mother of religious souls. Rather, this combination suggests a particular mission of intercession and mediation in favor of religious and particularly religious priests. It is also interesting that this is combined with the notion of participation through faith in Holy Communion, themes that were touched upon by the then reigning Pope, Pius XII, two months earlier in the Encyclical *Mediator Dei* (Nov 20, 1947).<sup>1</sup>

While admitting Pierina Gilli's lack of theological formation, and that she was probably not consciously aware of contemporary theological currents, the text of the secret is in harmony with an entire theological current present in the Church in the years preceding this communication.

The discussion on the theme of the priesthood of the faithful began in the early years of the last century through the pastoral and theological work of the Liturgical Movement.<sup>2</sup> Pius X's appeal for the active participation of the faithful in the sacred mysteries in the *Motu Proprio* "Tra le sollecitudini" in 1903<sup>3</sup>, provoked a reflection on their precise role in the liturgy. This reflection took place in three fundamental periods: from Pius X to the encyclicals *Mystici Corporis* and *Mediator Dei*, from these to the documents of the Second Vatican Council and finally to the post-conciliar debate.

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<sup>1</sup> PIO XII *Mediator Dei*, en *Enchiridion delle Encicliche VI*, EDB, Bologna, 1995. nn 430-632.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. ELBERTI, *Il sacerdozio regale dei fedeli nei prodromi del Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II (1903-1962)*, Analecta Gregoriana 254, Roma 1989.

<sup>3</sup> PIO X. *Motu proprio, Tra le sollecitudini, sulla musica sacra*, 22 Novembre 1903, *ASS* 36 (1903-4), 329-339.

Pius XI stimulated this reflection in two moments: first with the encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, in 1928<sup>4</sup>, where he justified the expiatory value of the devotion to the Sacred Heart by appealing both to the notion of active participation and to the common priesthood. For the first time, a papal document established a direct relationship between the sacrifice of Christ, the offering of the Church, and that of the assembly in which the faithful, as a priestly people (1 Pt 2:9), exercise this priesthood together with the priest, to the extent that they offer themselves as a victim for their own sins and for those of the whole human race.<sup>5</sup> Later, he published the Apostolic Constitution *Divini Cultus*<sup>6</sup> on the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Tra le sollecitudini*. This document regulates the active participation of the faithful in Gregorian chant, applying the general law according to which they must not be mute spectators.<sup>7</sup>

As the Jesuit theologian Arturo Elberti points out,<sup>8</sup> although *Miserentissimus Redemptor* went a step further, it left open the questions of what the assembly's offering consists of and what the offering of a priestly community really is. These prudent invitations to rediscover the priesthood of the people were accepted by the Liturgical Movement and by some theologians close to it. The central question of this period was to know how the common priesthood was carried out and above all what role the faithful had in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> Among these authors were Lambert Beauduin, Gustave Thils, Paul Dabin, Emil Mersch, Bernard Capelle, Bernard Botte and, from the biblical point of view, Lucien Cerfaux. We will illustrate some of these positions.

Dom. Lambert Beauduin,<sup>10</sup> defined the liturgy as "worship of the Church" with worship as the genre and the Church the specific difference using the classical method of definition. Since the Church is social, hierarchical, universal, a continuation of Christ, sanctifying (ministerial) and composed of men, the liturgy must also have these characteristics. With these premises, he refers to the liturgical aspect of the Church's worship, explaining the meaning of the priesthood with which Christ makes his liturgical action present in the Church, saying that it is:

- Personal: it is the personal priesthood of Christ that acts through his ministers.

- Collective: it is communitarian, because Christ recapitulates in himself all redeemed humanity. When the Church celebrates, she exercises a truly priestly, collective and supportive action on behalf of the entire community.<sup>11</sup> This view of the participation of the faithful in the liturgy was a novelty for the time, although Beauduin points out that the liturgy had always maintained this tradition through the use of plural forms and the symbolic greeting of the priest to the people even when he celebrated alone.<sup>12</sup>

- Hierarchical: Christ's worship of the Father is made visible through ministerial priests who act as instruments in his name and without whom the assembly would be anarchy.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *AAS*, 20 (1928): 165-178.

<sup>5</sup> Neque enim arcani huius sacerdotii et satisfaciendi sacrificandi muneris participatione ii soli fruuntur, quibus Pontifex noster Christus Iesus ministris utitur ad oblationem mundam divino Nomini ab ortu solis usque ad occasum omni loco offerendam sed etiam christianorum gens universa, ab Apostolorum Principe "genus electum, regale sacerdotium" (1Pt 2,9) iure appellata, debet cum pro se, tum pro toto humano genere offerre pro peccatis (Hb 5,2) haud aliter prope modum quam sacerdos omnis ac pontifex "ex hominibus assumptus pro hominibus constituitur in iis quae sunt ad Deum (Hb 5,1). *Ibidem*, 171-172.

<sup>6</sup> *AAS*, 21(1929): 33-41.

<sup>7</sup> «Ac revera pernecessse est ut fideles, non tamquam extranei vel muti spectantes, sed penitus liturgiae pulchritudine affecti, sic caerimoniis sacris intersint... ut vocem suam sacerdotis vel scholae vocibus, ad praescriptas normas, alternant: quod si auspiciato contigat, iam non illud eveniet ut populus aut nequaquam, aut levi quodam demissoque murmurare communibus, precibus, liturgica vulgarive lingua propositis, vix respondeat...» *Ibidem*, 40.

<sup>8</sup> A. ELBERTI, *Il sacerdozio regale dei fedeli*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> A. ELBERTI, *Il sacerdozio regale dei fedeli*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> A. ELBERTI, *Il sacerdozio regale dei fedeli*, 29-43.

<sup>11</sup> LAMBERT BEAUDUIN, *Essai de Manuel de Liturgie*, in *Melanges Liturgiques*, Mont César, Louvain 1954, 82.

<sup>12</sup> LAMBERT BEAUDUIN, *Essai de Manuel de Liturgie*, 87.

<sup>13</sup> «Privées du ministère d'un membre de la hiérarchie catholique, nos assemblées culturelles seraient anarchiques: c'est ce qui nous appellons le caractère hiérarchique de la liturgie.» LAMBERT BEAUDUIN, *Essai de Manuel de Liturgie*, 87.

Thils,<sup>14</sup> in an article published in 1938,<sup>15</sup> starting from a discussion on the sacramental nature of the baptismal character, he clarifies that any discussion on the participation of the faithful in the worship of the Church must also characterize it as a sacramental priesthood, and not only as a moral or metaphorical priesthood corresponding to any religious act.

Lucien Cerfaux (1883-1968),<sup>16</sup> Studying the problem from a biblical standpoint, he came to a different conclusion<sup>17</sup> Interpreting the relevant biblical texts, in particular 1 Pt 2:5-9, Cerfaux concludes that the term "royal priesthood" must be understood as a holy priesthood that offers exclusively spiritual and interior sacrifices, that is, those offered through a holy life, and has nothing to do with the exercise of the liturgy which are necessarily external celebrations. He sees further proof of this in 1 Pt 2:5 by considering the terms temple, sacrifice and priesthood as metaphors that spiritualize the realities to which they refer. This position has been challenged by further biblical investigations and by the documents of the Council (cf. SC 26), but it was common among certain Catholics who feared that any emphasis on the royal priesthood would detract from the hierarchical priesthood.

Although this theme was not at the center of Odo Casel's interests, Arturo Elberti argues that, although peripheral, Casel's doctrine on the subject was always clear and consistent.<sup>18</sup> Casel emphasizes the importance of the ministerial and hierarchical priesthood, without which there could be no sacramental action. For the same reason he affirms that, since the whole Church is led by Christ, when he acts, all the members of the Church, the body of Christ, act in her.<sup>19</sup> In Casel, as in many others, the re-evaluation of the theme of the body of Christ was decisive in stimulating reflection on the royal priesthood. The priesthood of the faithful is approached by considering that the mystical body of Christ is realized in the act of worship, in the sense that it becomes the subject and agent of the liturgy, that it receives its dignity and its absolute value, as the active salvific presence of Christ for all who participate in it. Casel's vision of the priesthood of Christ, participated in by his Church, goes beyond the analogical or metaphorical vision of the priesthood.

This deeper reflection on the consequences of Baptism and especially on the royal or communal priesthood of the faithful and the possibility they had of priestly participation in the theological liturgical mysteries prompted Pope Pius XII to seek to unite the people again with the liturgy. After laying the theological foundations in 1943 with the concept of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ in the encyclical *Mystici corporis*<sup>20</sup>, in the encyclical *Mediator Dei* he affirms that those who promoted a greater external participation of the faithful and work "to make the liturgy even externally a sacred action, to which all those present communicate in fact" are worthy of praise. However, he considered participation above all from the internal point of view in which the faithful would participate actively, when they offer themselves as victims: "exercised with such commitment and fervor as to place oneself in intimate contact with the High Priest... offering with him and for him".<sup>21</sup>

In *Mediator Dei*, Pius XII describes various levels of participation: external, internal, active, and sacramental, although he does not speak of a priestly participation of the faithful. For him, the participation of the faithful consists above all in uniting themselves with the priest, the only one who carries out Christ's priestly action.

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<sup>14</sup> A. ELBERTI, *Il sacerdozio regale dei fedeli*, 43-48.

<sup>15</sup> GUSTAVE THILS, "Le pouvoir cultuel du baptisé," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovaniensis*, 15 (1938): 683-689.

<sup>16</sup> A. ELBERTI, *Il sacerdozio regale dei fedeli*, 48-58.

<sup>17</sup> LUCIEN CERFAUX "Regale Sacerdotium," in *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 28 (1939): 5-39. = *Recueil L. Cerfaux, II.*, Gremloux 1954, 283-315.

<sup>18</sup> A. ELBERTI, *Il sacerdozio regale dei fedeli*, 93-102.

<sup>19</sup> «His [Casel's] doctrine on the subject has always been clear, always the same: that is, emphasizing the importance of the ministerial and hierarchical priesthood, without which there would be no sacramental action, for this very reason, since the whole Church is guided by Christ, when she acts, all the faithful, members of the Church, the Body of Christ, also act in her.» A. ELBERTI, *Il sacerdozio regale dei fedeli*, 97.

<sup>20</sup> PIO XII *Mystici corporis*, (29 giugno 1943) en *Enchiridion delle Encicliche VI*, EDB, Bologna, 1995. nn 151-260.

<sup>21</sup> PIO XII *Mediator Dei*, en *Enchiridion delle Encicliche VI*, EDB, Bologna, 1995. nn 529, 506.

The Second Vatican Council, when it affirmed that the liturgy is the action of the whole body of Christ, took a step forward and the theme of the royal priesthood of the faithful became a pillar for the lay spirituality of the post-conciliar period. I renounce, however, to explore further these considerations as I would like to limit myself to the immediate area of the "personal secret".

Although it cannot be excluded that Pierina heard something of the theological debate just exposed, perhaps through some sermons, I believe that we can say that for her, the notion of her priestly mission would have begun with the secret received in the experience of the holy communion on September 16, 1947. She understood that it was a special union with the humanity of Christ who in some way entrusted to her a particular mission, priestly and maternal, of mediation, intercession and consolation for consecrated souls and, in particular, for religious priests. Be that as it may, I believe that this experience transformed the spiritual sense for the rest of her life without changing the spiritual activities as such. She would have lived the mission of the baptismal priesthood long before it became common in spirituality.

I also believe that the other aspects, which we can call devotional, arose together with the message of Montichiari. In general, it can be said that these practices do not differ from other similar practices that have arisen from private apparitions or revelations already consolidated in the Church. In my opinion, these practices should be read in the light of the revelation of the priestly mission, no longer just a personal secret given to Pierina Gilli, but shared with all those who practice these devotions linked to the Mystical Rose.

Among the devotions that arose from Montichiari we find:

1. The practice of a special devotion on the 13th day of the month, culminating on the 13th of July each year.
2. 1947 The communion of reparation. The request that the practice of Reparatory Communion, explained to Sister Lucia of Fatima, be extended to the whole world every October 13.
3. 1966 From Montichiari Our Lady, every December 8th, asks for the Hour of Grace
4. 1966 On the Octave of Easter (in Albis), in Montichiari, as the feast of Divine Mercy.

The first of these devotions is celebrated on the 13th of each month: "I want the 13th of each month to be a 'Marian day', which is preceded by special prayers of preparation for 12 days." At the beginning it would be initially oriented to consecrated souls "in reparation for the offenses that the Lord receives from so many consecrated persons and to make them know the gravity of sin, such as to cause them hellish punishment." and "this day is to be sanctified with special prayers, such as Holy Mass, Holy Communion, the Rosary, the hour of adoration." (June 1, 1947)", later the proposed devotion was extended on July 13 to all religious and priests and then that could involve: "other souls who live by generosity and love for sacrifices, trials, humiliations, to make reparation for the offenses that our Lord receives from consecrated souls who live in mortal sin" and "other souls [who] totally sacrifice their lives to make reparation for the betrayals that our Lord receives from the priests of Judas." It seems that Pierina Gilli, in accepting what the Lord has asked of her, would be included between these last two categories and that this concept also clarifies the meaning of "personal secret."

The second devotion to be examined of those requested of Pierina is the renewal of the "Hour of Grace" every December 8 at noon in a church or wherever we find ourselves. There are no prescribed prayers but to unite ourselves with Mary. This practice originates in the apparition of November 22, 1947 in the cathedral of Montichiari and ends with a promise: "On December 8, at noon, I will come here again to the parish, it will be the Hour of Grace". Then: on the same December 8th: "I desire that every year, on December 8th, the universal Hour of Grace be practiced at noon: with this practice numerous spiritual and corporal graces will be obtained. Those who will not be able to go to their churches, while remaining in their homes, by praying at noon will obtain my graces." Her Son - Our Lady assures us - is ready to grant "his greatest mercy as long as the Good always continue to pray for their sinful brothers". The then parish priest, Fr. Luigi Bonomini, was able to attest that numerous graces of conversion and healing had indeed occurred on that occasion.

The third practice related to spirituality promoted by the Mystical Rose is the emphasis on the feast of Divine Mercy on the Octave of Easter as early as the year 1966. This is connected to the 1966 apparitions at the Fontanelle. On February 27, 1966, we find written that the Virgin says: "On Sunday octave (in albis), My Divine Son sends me once again to earth in Montichiari to bring abundant graces to humanity." It is announced that after the Madonna's intervention the spring of the Fontanelle will become miraculous; and that it will be called the "Fountain of mercy and grace" and that "from that Sunday onwards the sick may always be brought". From that moment on, a particular devotion to mercy and

physical and spiritual healing was anticipated at the Fontanelle on the day of the Sunday in Albis, preceding, by several decades, the feast established by St. John Paul II as Divine Mercy Sunday.<sup>22</sup>

The fourth and final practice originated on August 6, 1966, the feast of Corpus Christi which, according to Pierina Gilli, Mary says: "My Divine Son Jesus has sent me again to ask for the World Union of Reparatory Communion. And let this happen on October 13", and "May the news of this holy initiative be spread to the whole world, which must begin this year for the first time but then always repeated. The reverend priests and faithful who will do this Eucharistic practice are assured of the abundance of my graces." The date of October 13 also establishes a connection with the apparitions of Fatima which, according to Pierina Gilli, is not accidental but providential given the close link between the message of Montichiari and that of Fatima.

As has already been related in a previous conference, the Reparatory Communion is centered on faith in the Eucharistic Presence as a living and dynamic reality throughout salvation history and through the mediation of the Immaculate Heart.

The practice of reparatory communion requested at Fatima was strengthened with the experiences revealed by Sister Lucia during her stay in Pontevedra. While there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the alleged revelations to Sister Lucia after Fatima, I believe it is necessary to recall that they still do not enjoy the same degree of ecclesiastical approval as those of Fatima. They will certainly be strengthened when the hoped-for beatification and canonization of Sister Lucy finally arrives.

The first apparition would be on December 10, 1925, with a second, of the Child Jesus, on February 15, 1926. In these apparitions, the graces of the Reparatory Communion on the first five Saturdays of the month are necessarily tied to making sure of going to confession, of reciting at least one Rosary and of contemplating the Mysteries for at least 15 minutes. A third vision, that of May 29, 1930, offers further explanations on the reparation of the five offenses towards the Immaculate Heart of Mary already explained in another lecture.

Since this further deepening of the message of Fatima, and especially the devotion to the five Saturdays of the month, was approved by the bishop of Leira in 1939, it was certainly known to Pierina and in all probability incorporated into her personal devotional life even before the specific request made by the Mystical Rose in the sixties.

In conclusion, I believe that we can confidently say that the spiritual practices that have arisen from the spirituality of the Mystical Rose, centered largely on the imploration of grace and divine mercy, not only have no heterodox or esoteric elements, but that they are centered on the sacramental practice of the Church and the ordinary means of obtaining grace especially, communion, Eucharistic devotion, public and private prayer in different forms. From this point of view, since they are centered on sacramental practice, they are in line with the encouragement that the papal magisterium has given throughout the last century to the practice of frequent communion, devotion to the Sacred Heart, and, in particular, the practice of reparation.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, these practices are in the wake of other practices that have arisen from other private revelations. In addition to the already mentioned five first Saturdays, we have the practice of the first Friday of the month, and the holy hour of reparation on Thursdays. There is also a certain analogy between other practices such as the forty hours and other similar ones. In short, it can be said that the devotional practices proposed by the spirituality of the Mystical Rose, and lived with full consciousness by Pierina Gilli throughout her life, not only are not incompatible with the Church's proposal for Eucharistic devotion in general, but are fully in conformity with it and are an authentic path to holiness.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> About this we can see: CONGREGAZIONE PER IL CULTO DIVINO, *Direttorio su pietà popolare e liturgia. Principi e orientamenti*, Città del Vaticano 2002: "In recent times, connected with the Easter Octave, and following the messages of Sister Faustina Kowalska, canonized on April 30, 2000, a particular devotion to the divine mercy bestowed by Christ, dead and risen, has gradually spread. This devotion is the source of the Spirit who forgives sin and restores the joy of salvation. Since the Liturgy of the "Second Sunday of Easter, or of Divine Mercy"—as it is now called—is the natural setting for expressing the acceptance of the mercy of the Redeemer of humanity, the faithful should be taught to understand this devotion in light of the liturgical celebrations of these Easter days. Indeed, "the Paschal Christ is the definitive incarnation of mercy, its living sign: both historical and eschatological. In the same spirit, the Liturgy of the Easter season places on our lips the words of the psalm: "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever." (Sal 89 [88], 2)»." No 154.

<sup>23</sup> L.M. CIAPPI, *From the Encyclical Hauerietis aquas to the Encyclical Dives in misericordia, Confirmation and Development of Devotion to the Heart of Jesus*, in, AaVv., *Towards a Civilization of Love*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1985, pp. 9-24; F. DEGLI ESPOSTI, *La teologia del Sacro Cuore di Gesù. Da Leone XIII a Pio XII*, Herder, Roma 1944; J. SOLANO, *Sviluppo storico della riparazione nel culto al C.D.G.*, C.D.C, Roma 1980.

<sup>24</sup> "Eucharistic devotion, so deeply rooted in the Christian people, must however be educated to grasp two underlying realities :

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- that the supreme point of reference for Eucharistic piety is the Lord's Passover; Easter, in fact, according to the Fathers' vision, is the feast of the Eucharist, just as, moreover, the Eucharist is first and foremost a celebration of Easter, that is, of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus;

- that every form of Eucharistic devotion has an intrinsic reference to the Eucharistic Sacrifice, either because it prepares for its celebration or because it prolongs the cultic and existential orientations inspired by it.

Therefore, the Roman Ritual admonishes: "The faithful, when they venerate Christ present in the Sacrament, should remember that this presence derives from the Sacrifice and tends toward sacramental and spiritual communion." CONGREGAZIONE PER IL CULTO DIVINO, *Direttorio su pietà popolare e liturgia. Principi e orientamenti*, Città del Vaticano 2002. No 161.