

The Dolorous Passion - Preface

“One day in the Long
Retreat they were
reading Sister
Emmerich’s account of
the Agony in the
Garden and I suddenly
began to cry and sob
and could not stop ...”

Gerard Manley Hopkins,

“The marvellous private revelations of Catherine
Emmerich”

Claudel

What is it about this book which has provoked such remarkable responses as those quoted above? Ever since its publication in the early 19th century, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* by Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich has retained a privileged, perhaps unique position among the devotional books of the Church. For it is not merely a work of uncanny power by a renowned mystic and stigmatist, but also presents a visionary recreation of the exact details and circumstances of the Passion, with some claims, at least, to authentic private revelation, giving the faithful the sense of being privileged witnesses to the events described more sparingly in the Gospels.

The genesis of this book, and Emmerich’s other writings, is itself a

remarkable story, described at length in Clemens Brentano's introduction to this edition. Brentano (1778 - 1842), a leader of the Romantic movement and one of Germany's greatest poets, was a lapsed Catholic whose private life had descended in degrees of ruin into near madness until shortly before his encounter with Emmerich. His return to the faith was cemented by this experience, and indeed the meeting of these two remarkable figures can be seen as providential: for while Emmerich contributed decisively to the reclamation of one of Europe's greatest writers, it was Brentano who transcribed, edited, and published Emmerich's visions: without Brentano's conversion we should not have these books at all.

Mention of Brentano immediately raises the much debated question of the extent to which the poet's hand contributed to the mystic's visions. And indeed, these books have always been renowned for their poetical power, as these words of Léon Bloy bear out:

“Have I told you that sister Anne Catherine Emmerich, the stigmatised Visionary of Dulmen, is, in my eyes, the greatest of all poets, without exception? So great and such a poet that when I think of her, everything else is as nought.”

Nevertheless, Bloy was a mystic as well as a poet, and Brentano's own work is utterly unlike the visions he transcribed for Emmerich. Thus, while the exact nature of his contributions to these works remains uncertain, it seems unlikely to have been substantial.

Another important point often raised in connection with Emmerich's books, and one discussed at length by Brentano in his introduction, is that of the exact character of these visions, and the nature of private

revelation. It seems clear that Emmerich herself did not regard most of the visions recorded in these books as private revelations so much as meditations inspired, perhaps, and guided, no doubt, by the Holy Spirit. Unlike St. Bernadette and the children of Fatima, there is no indication that she was specially entrusted by God with a truth to be made known to the Church Militant; and here it is worth repeating that even in the case of private revelations verified by the Church, there is never any question that the truths they contain ever amount to an addition to the Deposit of Faith, or can ever be binding on the faith of individual Catholics. Assuredly, in Anne Catherine Emmerich's case, it was the mystic and not the poet who was recently beatified by the Church. And yet, in these writings, the poet and the mystic intersect: we shall never know to what extent Emmerich's visions were indeed authentic private revelations: it seems unreasonable to doubt that there is more than poetry here, for modern research has uncannily substantiated many of the cultural and topographical details they contain, and, as Raïssa Maritain has said, "No mere poet could have given a picture of such depth, coherence and theological value, of the inner life of a co-sufferer in Christ's Passion."