

Adrienne von Speyr and the Book of All Saints

Jacques Servais, S.J.

Who is Adrienne von Speyr (1902–1967)? A woman of the Church, the little-known inspiration of the great theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, but above all, quite simply, a physician who lived her profession as a vocation demanding a total commitment. From childhood she was pursued by an idea to which she remained faithful through the myriad difficulties of a youth deprived of the support of a family: to place herself, through medicine, entirely at the service of people suffering from illness. In 1931 in Basel, she opened an office that was immediately packed: she would receive there up to sixty to eighty patients a day, most of whom were poor and living on the fringes of society, who often required a physician of the soul more than a physician of the body.

Now this inexhaustible dedication to the sick and the poor was intimately linked in her to the thirst to give herself to God, to belong to him without reservation and to place herself, through her entire existence, at his disposal. In her childhood and adolescence, Adrienne received exceptional graces (for example, at seven years of age, an “encounter” with Saint Ignatius of Loyola; at seventeen, a vision of the Blessed Virgin). Undoubtedly because of that, too, during the long period before she entered the Catholic Church (at the age of thirty-eight), she was painfully in search of the God who was “other” than the one presented to her by her surroundings: a milieu of a bourgeois, conventional Protestantism that was, from all appearances, strongly anti-Catholic. She did not find this God toward whom she felt drawn by the whole of her being, and after an unhappy attempt to find God with a Protestant sect called the deaconesses, she resolved to marry a professor of the University of Basel, a widower, father of two young children (later, on the death of her husband, she would marry a second time, again more through compassion than through truly personal desire). The desire for total consecration to God remained very acute in her, and when in 1940 she met the student chaplain, Hans Urs von Balthasar, she finally saw open before her the much-sought-after path of Catholic Truth.

After her conversion, in 1940, she was filled with a charism of prayer and extraordinary life commitment. From then on, the vocation of physician and unconditional belonging to the Lord were fully united in her—the service of neighbor lived in complete forgetfulness of self through love of God, who loved humanity in Christ: the ideal of the Community of Saint John that she would found with Balthasar. But she received at the same time graces from heaven of which her confessor would be the discreet and efficacious witness for more than twenty-five years. Gifts of miraculous healing, but also of “prophecy”, in the original sense of the word—not so much (although at times also) the power to predict future events as, rather, the charism of interpreting the Scriptures. In revelation, before which she placed herself totally as an obedient listener, Adrienne read the responses of heaven: responses that we would not perhaps expect in this form but which, if we are ready for conversion, bring much more fundamental help than the solutions and projects we are able to draw from our own resources.

At the rate of twenty minutes a day, Adrienne thus, for more than a decade, provided commentary, verse by verse, for a large part of the Sacred Books. First the writings of the “pillars” of the Church: all of Saint John (including the Apocalypse), all of Saint Peter, all of Saint James, a part of Saint Paul, with whom, however, she felt less familiar than Saint John, who was by far her preference. Then large sections of the Gospels, the Prophets, the Psalms, and so on. But alongside these scriptural meditations, which constitute the heart of her spirituality,

she would also dictate thematic books: on creation, man, the infinite God, the face of the Father, obedience, the life of the evangelical counsels, the sacraments, especially confession, death, eternal life ...

An intense activity, carried on at the same time as the medical profession, always accompanied by long nights of contemplation and penance for the sake of all those who were suffering and spiritually ill, whom she “carried” in following Christ (“behind” him and, so, at a distance, with a wholly Ignatian reverence!)—all the way to Golgotha and even into hell. An activity that was transformed ever more into passion: the repeated heart attacks, which advanced the progression of diabetes and degenerative arthritis and from then on increasingly immobilized her, were only the external manifestation of an intimate participation in the Cross (she would receive the stigmata but asked heaven to take them away from her so that she could continue her work as a physician in an unassuming way). In 1950, she was forced to limit and then soon to stop her medical practice completely. Then began long, dark years spent in embroidering and, after she went blind, in knitting in silence and adoration. A “death by drops”, in undefined tortures of which Balthasar was nearly the only witness (she refused to go to the hospital). “How beautiful it is to die!” she would say to him, followed by words that expressed the joy that remained alive in her heart in the midst of the worst sufferings—the joy of no longer having anything else before oneself except God alone. She died September 17, 1967, on the feast of Saint Hildegarde, physician and mystic, whom she had very especially venerated. Several days earlier, she had still been able to utter a few words: “Ah, well! Everything is commended to God. I am going to do all I can, I promise. But first, I would like to be able to rest a little, please.”

The abundant harvest of graces hidden in this theological mission for our times still waits to be more fully carried into the storehouses of the Church for whom she was sent. Now, however, a century after her birth, there is more than one sign to indicate that the moment of her “reawakening” is at hand!

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