Mystical or hysterical?

by Lauve H. Steenhuisen in the May 17, 2003 issue

Is she mad, or is she right? ask the authors of the mystical revelations of St. Gemma Galgani, the first woman canonized in the 20th century. Although they leave this question unanswered, the historically detailed and very personal material they provide by and about Galgani affords an intriguingly mixed conclusion. Rudolph Bell, a historian at Rutgers, and Christina Mazzoni, a professor of romance languages at the University of Vermont, have produced an interesting combination of historical analysis, feminist hermeneutics and primary source translation of Galgani's autobiography, diary entries and ecstatic utterances transcribed by her family. These seemingly divergent lenses refract pieces of Galgani which, when combined by the reader, construct a picture of a young woman whose intense physical ravages were either psychosomatic creations or sufferings given by God as channels of mutual communication and erotic relationality.

Galgani was startlingly other-worldly. The interior world she inhabited is the world of fetid, overwrought, medieval Italian Catholicism. One of the themes this book raises is the transhistorical reality of a mystical modern. Galgani was born in the small village of Lucca, Italy, in 1878, died there in 1903, and remained determinedly nonmodern throughout her young life. Her viscerally pietistic religiosity stands against the scientific rationalism of her time. In the presence of "worldly" dinner-table conversations Galgani gazes instead at a cross to focus her attentions on the beyond. She resists modernity's primary characteristic, cynicism, for the childlike innocence of an alternate age. In Galgani's diaries as in her behavior, there is a strong perception that she senses the threat that modernity and reality pose for her religious posture.

Bell and Mazzoni also evoke the tension between mysticism and hysteria. To a 21st-century reader, the catalogue of Galgani's somatic suffering can seem shocking: back abscesses, free flowing bleeding, a foot so diseased doctors urge amputation and, her greatest blessing, the stigmatic wounds of Christ. With each symptom Galgani rejoices and offers ecstatic paeans of praise to her "lover and bridegroom." She is tortured by diabolical visitations and visual distortions, all of which in

medieval times would have been catalogued as signs of mystical grace and favor. But as she is a modern in dialogue with a world in which Freud has recently published his work on hysteria, she is constrained by the diagnoses of her physicians. They consistently conclude that she is a hysteric whose physical symptoms reflect internal psychological tensions. But this medical framing of her condition disallows the conclusion that perhaps Galgani is both "mad and right," that her body's language expresses intimacy with the divine.

And what are moderns to do with the carnival of Galgani's canonization proceedings? This is the "afterlife" of the book's subtitle, and quite an afterlife it is. During her lifetime her family circumstances provided opportunities for hostility toward efforts to promote her to sainthood. Her mother contracted tuberculosis and died when Galgani was seven. Her father, a prosperous pharmacist in Lucca, had to sell the family home to pay the medical bills and died of throat cancer a few years later. Gemma and her siblings moved in with ambivalent cousins who, while witnessing and transcribing the majority of her ecstatic utterances and somatic pieties, complained about all the blood they had to clean up.

Galgani's confessors, Monsignor Volpi and Father Germano, acted as both therapists and interpreters of her mystical experiences during her lifetime. Yet as witnesses and eventual promoters of her saintliness during the canonization process, they provided contradictory testimony. This fascinating portion of the book vividly illustrates the hostile forces arrayed against her "blessedness." During the initial canonization proceedings Galgani's primary confessor called her "a silly little thing, a half-wit." Her spiritual director and biographer, Father Germano, was castigated for boasting that he could obtain sainthood for almost anyone. The nuns of the several convents which had refused to let her into the novitiate testified defensively that "in the name of Jesus she prophesied punishments on our . . . community if we did not open our doors to her." The Passionist convent at Corneto, which had dissuaded her aunts from bringing her with them for a visit, in an ironic twist embraced and championed a postmortem Galgani for sainthood. Nonetheless, her sanctity prevailed, and her eventual canonization as saint was credentialed through the miraculous healings and alleviation of suffering she provided to others in her afterlife.

The Voices of Gemma Galgani is at its best when it intensifies the tensions between Galgani's medieval piety and a secularized modernity. The historical material is engaging, if of narrow interest; the feminist hermeneutic provocative and intriguing

but ultimately unenlightening. This is a story about a mystical intensity reliant on pain for the transmutation of suffering into saintliness through self-abnegating compassion. One is left to conclude with Galgani that the task of the spiritual life for everyone must be this very work of changing pain into grace, and that in the end, in this world, "this pretend Academy of Heaven, one must learn only to love."