Virgin mothers and *alter Christi*
Stigmatic women and the cult of motherhood in Europe

The Van Osselaer, Leonardo Rossi and Andrea Graus

Stigmatic mothers

And so God decided to give to the world an example of exceptional virtue in the married state, so people would recognize in Elisabeth the ‘strong woman’ who, according to the Holy Scripture, is so seldom found: *Mullerum fortem qui inveniet?* (Prov. 31).1

This fragment of a booklet, published in 1936, on the Italian mystic and laywoman Elisabetta Canori Mora (1774-1825), exemplifies the way her virtues were promoted at an international level. In the mid-nineteenth century, Canori Mora became an exemplary housewife. Subsequently, in 1928 she was declared Venerable and in 1994 she was beatified by Pope John Paul II. For more than a century, the Catholic idealization of domestic motherhood had been on the rise, and the profiles of saints-to-be often mirrored the ideals that the Church wanted to promote. However, Canori Mora’s history is more complex than the mere promotion of a Catholic mother to a saintly level. As we will see, saintly mothers are rare. In Canori Mora’s case, emphasizing her motherhood and married state seems to have occurred in parallel with minimizing her mystical profile as prophetess and stigmatic (that is, someone

---

1 This research was supported by the ERC-funded project STIGMATICS, “Between saints and celebrities. The devotion and promotion of stigmatics in Europe, c. 1800-1950” (project reference: 637908).

who bore the wounds of Christ\(^3\). In this article, we focus on this conundrum and examine how the maternal and mystical profiles became mixed with and linked to ideas of saintliness. We will do so by extrapolating from Canon Mora’s case and examining other laywomen who combined these two features: stigmatic mothers. As we will see, their cases allow us to gain an insight into ideals of sanctity at the official (Vatican) and unofficial levels (unauthorized cults).

Stigmatics were not as rare as one might think. Hundreds of cases were reported all over Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries\(^4\). The majority of these were women. In contrast to preceding ages, in modernity many were laywomen rather than cloistered nuns. In other words, modern stigmatics lived an ‘ordinary’ life, albeit one riddled with mystical episodes. This combination could put a strain on family life. In the case of the Frenchwoman Thérèse-Josephine Mollia (1806-1877), for example, her husband could no longer bear all the visitors trying to meet his spouse and he attempted to commit suicide\(^5\). Similarly, one of the biographies on the Italian mystic Anna Maria Taigi (1796-1837), mentions how, when she went into ecstasy during her household work, she asked Jesus to choose someone else: “Leave me alone, oh Lord, she told Him naively, leave me alone! I am a mother, I have to work, go away, go away!\(^6\)”

Of the women who were stigmatics, mothers are a minority. Of the approximately 270 cases traced in five European countries (Italy, Spain, France, Germany and Belgium), only 18 had children\(^7\). What is more, several of them would have preferred not to have been married at all. Edith Channon, better known as Madame Royer (1841-1924), Domenica Nunziata Paiano (1924-1980) and Natassa Evolo (1924-1990) were all forced to marry, although they would have preferred a life of chastity. Even more telling is the case of the Italian, Anna Rosa Gattorno (1841-1900), who swore a vow of chastity after the death of her husband and founded a religious institution. Choosing a religious life meant no longer taking care of her own children, but she made this Abrahamic sacrifice after the Pope told her that God would take care of her children\(^8\).

Saintly stigmatic mothers appear as an absolute novelty of the nineteenth century. Weak by nature, sinners by inheritance\(^9\), daughters of a patriarchal Church and society, over the centuries women thought that, in order to rise above their condition, they had to “negate” their gender. The proto-martyrs, the holy medieval nuns and the modern beatitudes were all recognized for their heroic virtues, which included the sacrifice of motherhood and femininity\(^10\). Chastity was a virtue that was essential to becoming closer to holiness. In the seventeenth century, cloistered nuns were the models of sanctity. In the eighteenth century, the founders of religious institutions were included, and during the first part of the nineteenth century, it was also possible for some widows and aristocrats to become saints\(^11\). As a result, it seems, a saint could only have been unmarried and religious, or otherwise widowed and possibly also belonging to the social elite.

From the 1770s onwards, different factors shook the status quo. Revolutionary political events, the spread of the Enlightenment and new rationalist and secularist ideals led the Church to adopt new strategies. Ecclesiastical leaders pointed to the re-Christianization of society from the bottom-up, starting with the ‘simple mothers’\(^12\). As ‘earthly angels’ caring wives, children’s mentors and philanthropic missionaries, women became the heroines of the social apostolate and of the popularization of religion. Saintly stigmatic mothers represented the old mystical-visionary type (femina stelliga), combined with a new awareness of their sex and their ability to procreate (the ‘faldy female saint’\(^13\)).


\(^4\) Vie de la vénérable servante du Seigneur Anna-Maria Taigi, Bruxelles, H. Goemans, 1864, p. 26; “Extraordinary” aspects of her ‘ordinary’ domestic life are well described in Jean-François-Orséline Luquet, Notitia sulla vita e sulle virtù dell’umile serva di Dio Anna Maria Antonietta Gesualda Taigi nata Giannetti, Rome, Tipografa degli Eredi Paternò, 2nde Italian ed., 1851, p. 32-34.

\(^5\) Belgium: 3/19; Germany: 3/40; France: 4/53; Spain: 0/24; and Italy: 8/137.


\(^7\) This is the legacy left by the first Mother, Eve: “Great will be your pain in childbirth; in sorrow will your children come to birth; still your desire will be for your husband, but he will be your master” (Gen. 3:16).


Alteri Christi and saintly mothers

Studying the reception of stigmatic mothers allows us to address two types of saints or saints-to-be. Firstly, there were cases that were promoted by the Church as illustrative of its ‘politics of sanctity’ – that is, it presented “biographišci models which would convey well-determined pastoral priorities and contain both ecclesiastical and ecclesiological messages for the faithful”[14]. Only a small number of modern stigmatics entered into a canonization process. However, many of them were perceived as ‘living saints’ during their lifetime. If this fama sanctitatis continued after their death, it could support opening a cause for beatification. As Kenneth Woodward has pointed out:

(...) nowhere is the gap between official and popular ideas of sanctity more pronounced than in the causes of mystics, visionaries, and wonderworkers of the faith. Nowhere is popular devotion to the saints more at odds with the rules for making saints than in cases involving mystical phenomena[15].

Popular attention is usually drawn to the ‘secondary mystical phenomena’, such as stigmata, while this aspect plays little role in starting a process of beatification, where the heroic virtues are emphasized. As Woodward puts it: “mysticism has become confused with the miraculous”[16]. Nevertheless, in the case of stigmatics, their fame did not rely solely on the physical visibility of their stigmata – cases of ‘invisible’ stigmata were also reported. The corporeal element played an important role, but primarily because it was interpreted as a sign of God’s presence on Earth. Stigmatic women were perceived as ‘heroic victims’. Through their suffering, in sharing Christ’s Passion, they were atoning for the sins of humankind; in this reparatory suffering, they became alteri Christi[17].

Redemptive suffering and motherly ideals are linked more closely than we might think. Indeed, from the mid-nineteenth century, the Catholic faith regarded suffering and sacrifice as essential to womanhood[18]. As mentioned above, laudatory accounts of women’s sacrifice in the household were a new feature in Catholicism, and contrasted with older depictions of women as the ‘weaker vessel’. Within this new discourse, there was an increased idealization of the family and of the virtuous, non-childless mother. This positive evaluation of motherhood was linked to the gender gap the clergy perceived in religious practices. Women were regarded as more fervent and loyal church-goers than men – who had allegedly turned their backs on religion – and came to be referred to as the pius sex[19]. To guarantee the attendance of women at Church, the clergy praised domestic life and lauded the ‘angel in the house’: the Christian housewife. The ‘femme forte’ was a virtuous wife, supportive of her husband, who made her home a safe haven, secure from the dangers of the outside world. Characterized by love, sacrifice and self-denial, such a Catholic housewife displayed ‘true’ femininity. The representation of the Virgin Mary during the nineteenth century is telling in this regard: from a distant queen in Heaven she developed into an industrious Catholic housewife[20].

Given such a positive evaluation of domestic motherhood within the Church, it is strange to note that mother saints are in fact very rare. As we have seen, being married or being a mother is not the most common road to sanctity[21]. Those who do become saints are usually known as ‘mother of’ (such as the Virgin Mary’s mother, Saint Anne, or more recently Zelie Martin, mother of Thérèse of Lisieux)[22]. However, since the pontificate of John Paul II, a change can be perceived[23] and today “in a time experienced as a (non)culture of death, of euthanasia, of alcohol and drugs, of

---

[17] Otto Weis, “Stigmata”, op. cit., p. 113. Elisabetha Canori Moro received visible stigmata, but after praying she obtained the gift of invisibility. The case of Anna Maria Taigi is more difficult to determine, especially because she did not keep a diary. The sources mention pain, spasms, sacrifice and mystical pilgrimages to Calvary, but there is no explicit reference to stigmata.
[18] See also the book by Annette Müller-Bäcker, ed., Sanctity and Motherhood. Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages, New York/London, Routledge, 1995. She differentiates (p. 4) between mother saints such as the Virgin Mary and Saint Anne (“saints whose sanctity is based on motherhood”) and holy mothers (“whose public role in society was based on their status as spouse and mother; it was this status of motherhood that gave them entrance to the public sphere […] and for this reason they were called ‘saints’”).
[19] Agathe Bienraut, “Zeichen und Wunder”, op. cit., p. 12-13. From 1592 until 1978. During this pontificate, 76 laypeople were canonized, of which 40 were never married. Especially since Vatican II, this policy has been increasingly criticized.
the demise of the family and of genetic manipulation, it is advised that the search for candidates concentrate on the fields of medicine and social involvement, on family fathers and mothers."

As we will see below, recent cases of canonization personify the Church's cause against abortion and divorce. The cases of beatification of stigmatistic mothers, introduced in recent decades, reflect similar concerns: Maria Concetta Pantani (1894-1953), whose cause was officially initiated in 2007, was described as a family mother. Similarly, Anna Rosa Gattorno — the stigmatist who made the Abrahamic sacrifice of her children after the death of her husband — was beatified in 2000 and described as follows by the Vatican:

As an expression of a rare plan of God, in her three-fold experience of wife and mother, widow, and then religious and Foundress, in her mission of service to humanity and to extending the kingdom, Rosa Gattorno brought great honour to the ‘feminine genius’. Although she was ever faithful to God's call and a genuine teacher of Christian and ecclesial life, she remained essentially a mother: of her own children, whom she constantly followed, of the Sisters, whom she deeply loved, and of all the needy, the suffering and the unhappy, in whose faces she contemplated the face of Christ, poor, wounded and crucified.

As noted above, the cult of motherhood is reflected in images and publications on two stigmatistic mothers who have been beatified. In the following study, we focus on the biographies of Elisabetta Canori Mora and Anna Maria Taigi, which carry the imprint of their orthodoxy and reflect the ideals of the audience for which they were produced.

Anna Maria Taigi and Elisabetta Canori Mora

Elisabetta Canori Mora and Anna Maria Taigi were both laywomen from Rione who lived at the end of the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth century. They were members of the third order of the Trinitarians and their processes of beatification were initiated at almost the same time (Taigi in 1862 and Canori Mora a year later). Taigi was declared venerable in 1906 and beatified on 30 May 1920. Elisabetta's process was slightly slower: she was declared Venerable in 1928, but was only beatified on 24 April 1994. She is regarded as a patron of marriages in crisis, and as Valentina Cicalo has pointed out, it is telling that this occurred in the international year of the family. Gianna Beretta Molla (1922-1962), a Catholic physician who was against abortion and died from complications during child birth, was beatified on the same day. Molla and Canori Mora were thereby regarded as 'women of heroic love' symbols of the Church's stance against divorce and abortion. However, Taigi and Canori Mora had become exemplary women long before 1994. As Sarah Fiona MacLaren noted, they were connected to 'the Church's struggle with modernity and its attempt to regain its leadership after the devastating effects of the Enlightenment, secularization and rationalism'; when women had become "the most significant resource for the reconstruction of society to Christianity."

Elisabetta and Anna Maria present a completely new profile of holiness in the history of Catholicism, combining two seemingly incompatible aspects. On the one hand, their capacity for apocalyptic prophecy suggests they belong to the mystical-visionary current of the late Baroque; on the other hand, they were 'simple' housewives and mothers, models of the 'catholicism au féminin' born in the nineteenth century. The biographies of the two women show an evolution from a prophetic saintly ideal (mid-nineteenth century) to a 'hagiographic' saintly ideal that can be called 'soft' and 'weak' (late nineteenth century). The first hagiographic profile of Taigi, for example, is more political and prophetic in nature. In the apocalyptic atmosphere of Pius IX's pontificate, their prophecies found a willing audience within the clergy and laity devoted.

However, in the cases of Taigi and Mora, at time passed there was a 'domesticating' use of the maternal imagery. The bishop of Hérons, Jean-Félix Loquet, was the first to highlight the maternal aspect in Taigi, while Canori Mora's life was dedicated to the practice of Christian virtue. From prophecies advising popes and other leading

---


29 She emigrated to Brazil from Calabria, but her father forced her to marry. Back in Italy with the family, she was soon widowed and left alone with her daughter. Her requests to become a nun were rejected, so she devoted herself to a life of voluntary service to the social apostolate: Maria Concetta received stigmata and various mystical gifts. See Ulricino Parente, La Serra di Dio Maria Concetta Pantani: una madre di famiglia testimone del Vangelo, Turin, Elededic, 2013.

figures of their times, they were turned into ‘good Catholic mothers’ and presented as an example to all married women. This transition is not only attested to in their biographies but also in the Catholic press, especially in *La Civiltà Cattolica*. The devotional cards that have been preserved show a similar evolution. Whereas the older cards show two women praying in repose, the later cards include their children and, in the case of Taigi, also some of her needlework. It was this maternal, marital aspect that made Canori Mora and Taigi eventually suitable for sanctity. Taigi became the first woman, wife and mother to receive the recognition of heroic virtues, while Canori Mora — together with Gianna Beretta Molla — was chosen as a protector of the modern family. The supernatural gifts of the heroines were hidden, almost becoming marginal in their causes for canonization. Mothers, even of humble conditions, could now be saints.

**Spiritual mothers and living saints**

The selection of new saints indicates the ideals supported by the Pope, and what virtues, types and movements are held out as exemplary. Now, if the ideal of the Catholic mother played such an important role in the idealization and beatification processes of Taigi and Canori Mora, can the same be said about the stigmatic mothers that were never officially approved by the Church, whose ‘sanctity’ was a label assigned to them by their contemporaries? In other words, if motherhood is perceived as something that is closely connected to sanctity, is this reflected in narratives on non-approved saints?

Such a bottom-up ascription of sanctity is, of course, not completely detached from its more official definition. As Marcus Sieger noted, the creation of *sancta sanctissimae* “in a certain ecclesiastical context, in a certain ecclesiastical community, depends upon the traditional representations that this community links to sanctity and upon its perspectives of the future”. It should thus not surprise us that several other stigmatic laywomen, unacknowledged by the Church, were referred to as ‘mother’ by their devotees. They include Mutter Ursula (Ursula Hissböl, 1861-1940), Mutter Magdalena (Mechthild Thaller von Schönwerth, 1868-1919), Mamma Minna (Domenica Nunziata Paiano, 1924-1948), Mamma Natassa (Natassa Ewlo, 1924-2009) and Mamma Lucia (Lucia Fassonari, 1927-2015).

1888, p. 8: “le cure della famiglia non sono già d’impedimento alla pratica delle virtù cristiane”.

See, amongst others, the collection of devotional cards in the Rubenste Institute (University of Antwerp).


33 Norbert Leszczek, “Heiliggesprochen als Hierarchiebeschützt?”, op. cit., p. 11.


35 In her case, Bishop Luigi Renzo initiated her beatification process.

Given the prominence of the maternal ideal within the context of Catholic piety, it is likely that the Church’s positive evaluation of motherhood also had its effect on the popular reception of ‘unapproved’ living saints. However, when we take a closer look at how the ideal of motherhood is used in the unapproved cases, it is clear that it did not function in the same way as in the hagiographies of Canori Mora and Taigi. ‘Motherhood’ at the unofficial level was an empowering ideal, linked to women’s ‘motherly dedication’ and ‘caring nature’.

Instead of limiting them to the private sphere of their homes, their maternal qualities extended to taking care of their parishes, communities and friends. Just like many stigmatic religious women, they had spiritual children. Mutter Magdalena, for example, functioned (via letters) as a spiritual mother to many. Similarly, Mutter Ursula, who had three biological children (of which only one survived her), also functioned as a spiritual mother. As a ‘victim soul’ she was known for her contacts with the souls of those in purgatory, and she prayed and suffered especially for children’s souls. As for Mamma Lucia, although the Church condemned her alleged supernatural gifts, today an association founded in her name is valued by thousands of the faithful. They venerate Mamma Lucia as their spiritual guide, “Our Mother/Our Lady”, and build unapproved institutions and shrines in her honour.

**Conclusion**

As this study of stigmatic women shows, ideals of sanctity and motherhood were linked at two levels: the level of officially recognized cases and the level of the non-approved living saints. In relation to the official cases, a growing emphasis on motherhood can be detected from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Nevertheless, this positive emphasis on the topic had its negative counterpart. By focusing on motherhood, the Church confined women to the private sphere of the home, limiting their influence and erasing all possibilities for them to overcome their sexual and gendered condition. At the unofficial level, however, maternal ideals seem to have been more empowering when linked to sanctity. Equipping mystic women with a caring and nurturing nature allowed them to venture outside their homes and assume a role as spiritual mothers.

This later definition of motherhood, certainly more open and embracing, seems to have been possible only because there had been a positive evaluation of the housewife in nineteenth-century Catholicism. A ‘religious turn’ that, as we have seen, opened the door to having mother saints, was a complete novelty in Catholic history. In other
La maternité sacerdotale
L’appel aux mères dans les années 1920 ou le roman comme moyen de recrutement sacerdotal

Frédéric GUGELOT

Le prêtre catholique appartient à une caste masculine célibataire qui doit renouveler son recrutement à chaque génération. « J’abandonnerais ma mère, et je volerais au secours de l’Église, cette autre mère que nous aimons en fils dévoués et jaloux », avoue un ecclésiastique dans un roman de Ferdinand Fabre, spécialiste des sujets de la vie ecclésiastique. Si dès avant le conflit, l’Église promeut le recrutement sacerdotal par des appels constants à l’action maternelle, comme après la Grande Guerre, défendre un tel projet où une famille, même chrétienne, donne à l’Église un de ses fils, sans espérance de descendance autre que spirituelle, alors que le conflit a prélevé un lourd tribut sur la population française ? L’Église propose à des mères de transcender leur maternité naturelle en une maternité sacerdotale en jouant un rôle essentiel dans le décès et la poursuite des vocations. Afin de s’appuyer sur les mères pour prévenir son recrutement, l’Église déploie des arguments à même de valoriser un tel sacrifice.

Depuis le début du siècle, le recul des vocations est important, 1 635 ordinations en 1903, 1 114 en 1909, 704 en 1914. La guerre accentue la crise du clergé. 1 517 religieux et 3 101 prêtres et séminaristes meurent au front. Ils représentent 4% des effectifs d’avant le conflit. L’angoisse de la reconstruction hante les essayistes, en particulier catholiques. Comme le note l’abbé Brogeret : 

2 La revue Le recrutement sacerdotal naît en 1901.