

IS "THE POEM OF THE MAN-GOD" SIMPLY A BAD NOVEL?

Maria Valtorta's multi-volume life of Jesus flirts with heresy and exhibits bad taste. Its claim to authenticity have been rejected by Rome.

by Father Mitch Pacwa, S.J.

"The Poem of the Man-God" is a five-volume "narrative" of the life of Jesus written in the 1940s by a sickly Italian woman named Maria Valtorta. "Poem" purports to fill in the details of Jesus' life left blank by the four Gospels. Such narratives have been produced since the second century A.D. Some were written by gnostic heretics. Some by New Agers and occultists. And some were produced by pious Christians who made up stories about Jesus to edify their readers and listeners.

The four Gospels do not give a biography of Jesus--or of anyone else in His life. Their purpose is evangelical and theological--to proclaim the Good News that human beings need for their salvation. Thus, for centuries, the "hidden life" of Jesus has been the subject for speculation.

"The Poem of the Man-God" is in this tradition of apocryphal literature on New Testament themes. Valtorta claimed that she was the "secretary" of Jesus and Mary, and was setting down the divinely inspired truth about Jesus' life. The Church has rejected this claim. Nevertheless, "Poem" has become quite popular, particularly among Catholics as well.

Remarkably, the book has grown in popularity in part because its champions claim that high Church officials--including one Pope--endorsed it. They haven't. In fact, "Poem" was included on the Index of Forbidden books until the abolition of the Index in the 1960s. No less an authority than Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reiterates the Church's rejection of the claims made for "The Poem of the Man-God."

How did "The Poem of the Man-God" come to be, and how has the notion become widely accepted that it contains important religious truth?

Maria Valtorta, author of "Poem," was born in 1897 into a sadly dysfunctional family, where she suffered emotional abuse at the hands of a despotic mother. When she was 23, she was attacked and beaten by a mugger. She was never completely well after that. From 1933 on, she was unable to leave her bed.

Maria began to receive "dictations" on Good Friday, 1943. In 1947, she handed over 10,000 handwritten pages to her spiritual director, Father Romuald Migliorini, O.S.M. Father Migliorini typed them and Father

Corrado Berti, O.S.M. bound them. Fr. Berti, brought them to Father later Cardinal Augustin Bea, S.J., spiritual director to Pope Pius XII.

Did Pope Pius read the whole manuscript or parts? If only part, which part? Advertisements by the Canadian Central distributors for Valtorta (CEDIVAL) quote Father Bea: "I have read in typed manuscripts many of the books written by Maria Valtorta . . . As far as exegesis is concerned, I did not find any errors in the parts which I examined." Notice, he read only parts of the books. Which were they?

On Feb. 26, 1948, Fathers Migliorini, Berti and A. Cecchin enjoyed a private audience with Pope Pius XII, as listed in L'Osservatore Romano's daily announcement of audiences. Standing in St. Peter's Square after the audience, Father Berti wrote down Pope Pius' words as he remembered them. These words were "not" printed in L'Osservatore Romano, but Father Berti remembered the Pope saying:

"Publish this work as it is. There is no need to give an opinion about its origin, whether it be extraordinary or not. Who reads it, will understand. One hears of many visions and revelations. I will not say they are all authentic; but there are some of which it could be said that they are."

CEDIVAL calls this a "Supreme Pontifical Imprimatur," where "he took upon himself to pass the first official judgment on these writings." CEDIVAL glues this inside the cover, though the publisher does not print an imprimatur. The reason: it has none!

Confident of papal approval, Father Berti brought the books to the Vatican press. However, in 1949, two commissioners of the Holy Office, Msgr. Giovanni Pepe and Father Berruti, O.P., condemned the "Poem," ordering Berti to hand over every copy and sign an agreement not to publish it. Father Berti returned the manuscripts to Valtorta and handed over only his typed versions.

Despite his signed promise, in 1952 Father Berti went to publisher Emiliano Pisani. Though aware of the Holy Office's opposition, Pisani printed the first volume in 1956, and a new volume each year through 1959.

When volume four appeared, the Holy Office examined the "Poem" and condemned it, recommending that it be placed on the Index of Forbidden Books Dec. 16, 1959. Pope John XXIII signed the decree and ordered it published. L'Osservatore Romano, on Jan. 6, 1960, printed the condemnation with an accompanying front-page article, "A Badly Fictionalized Life of Jesus," to explain it.

The article complained that the "Poem" broke Canon Law. "Though they treat

exclusively of religious issues, these volumes do not have an "imprimatur," which is required by Canon 1385, sect. 1, n. 2."

Second, the long speeches of Jesus and Mary starkly contrast with the evangelists, who portray Jesus as "humble, reserved; His discourses are lean, incisive." Valtorta's fictionalized history makes Jesus sound "like a chatterbox, always ready to proclaim Himself the Messiah and the Son of God," or teach theology in modern terms. The Blessed Mother speaks like a "propagandist" for modern Marian theology.

Third, "some passages are rather risqué," like the "immodest" dance before Pilate (vol. 5, p. 73). There are "many historical, geographical and other blunders." For instance, Jesus uses screwdrivers (Vol. 1, pp. 195, 223), centuries before screws existed.

There are theological errors, as when "Jesus says" (vol. 1, p. 30) that Eve's temptation consisted in arousing her flesh, as the serpent sensuously "caressed" her. While she "began the sin by herself," she "accomplished it with her companion." Sun Myung Moon and Maria Valtorta may claim the first sin was sexual, but Scripture does not.

Vol. 1, p. 7, oddly claims, "Mary can be called the 'second-born' of the Father . . ." Her explanation limits the meaning, avoiding evidence of an authentic heresy; but it does not take away the basic impression that she wants to construct a new mariology, which simply goes beyond the limits of propriety." "Another strange and imprecise statement" made of Mary (vol. 4, p. 240) is that she will "be second to Peter with regard to ecclesiastical hierarchy. . ." Our Lady surpasses St. Peter's holiness, but she is not in the hierarchy, let alone second to St. Peter.

Further, Valtorta did not claim to write a novel, but called herself a "secretary" of Jesus and Mary, so, "in all parts on reads the words 'Jesus says. . .' or 'Mary says . . .'" The Church takes this claim to revelation very seriously, since it has the God-given duty to discern what is or is not truly from the Holy Spirit. In Valtorta's case, the Church decided against Divine inspiration.

Finally, "Poem" is condemned for reasons of disobedience. Competent Church authority had prohibited the printing of Valtorta's work.

Pope John's approval of the condemnation of the "Poem of the Man-God" should have ended the issue, but it did not. The publishers printed a second edition of 10 volumes, which the Church condemned in another front-page article in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Dec. 1, 1961. This second Italian edition was later translated into German, French, Spanish and English.

CEDIVAL asserts that a "modernist clan in the Church" . . .
"surreptitiously attempted to seize the manuscripts and destroy them,"
claiming "firsthand documentation on this." These "enemies" included Msgr.
Pepe and Father Berruti, the Holy Office censors.

I asked the head of CEDIVAL, Prof. Leo Brodeur, for evidence that Msgr.
Pepe and Father Berruti held any modernist heresies, but he had none. He
assumed they were modernists because the "Poem" claims "to help the Church
fight against the terrible heresy of modernism." If the "Poem's enemies
are modernists, Msgr. Pepe and Father Berruti must be modernists, too.

Such assertions are unacceptable. Accusations of modernism or any other
heresy without proof is slander.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, present head of the Sacred Congregation for the
Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the same office that condemned the
"Poem"), informed Cardinal Siri in 1985 of the "Poem's condemnation:

After the dissolution of the Index, when some people thought the printing
and distribution of the work was permitted, they were reminded again in
L'Osservatore Romano (June 15, 1966) that "The Index retains its moral
force despite its dissolution."

More recently (April 17, 1993, Prot. N. 144/58i), he wrote:

"The 'visions' and 'dictations' referred to in the work, "The Poem of the
Man-God," are simply the literary forms used by the author to narrate in
her own way the life of Jesus. They cannot be considered supernatural in
origin."

The best that can be said for "The Poem of the Man-God" is that it is a
bad novel. This was summed up in the L'Osservatore Romano headline, which
called the book "A Badly Fictionalized Life of Jesus."

At worst, "Poem's" impact is more serious. Though many people claim that
"Poem" helps their faith or their return to reading Scripture, they are
still being disobedient to the Church's decisions regarding the reading of
"Poem." How can such disregard for Church authority and wisdom be a help
in renewing the Church in these difficult times?

When Catholics insist on reading "Poem," despite Church condemnation, I
make these requests: First, read three hours of Scripture for every one
hour spent in the "Poem." The Church guarantees that the Bible is God's
Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Church has judged the "Poem" to be
a poorly done human work. Second, read solid Catholic theology books in

addition to Scripture. G.K. Chesterton, Frank Sheed, Archbishop Sheen's "Life of Christ" and many other works are excellent starts. Third, maintain a strong prayer life, drawing closer to Christ Jesus, Our Lord, at Mass and at eucharistic adoration, and to our Blessed Mother Mary, especially in the Rosary.

If sheep insist on bad pasturage, at least let them take antidotes.

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