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## Vinayasādhana

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## Maria Petyt: Mystic and Searcher

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### *Abstract*

Maria Petyt, though not widely known, deserves the attention and admiration of those who pursue the spiritual path. Her naive upbringing and the ordinary and orderly life she led are not in fact, deterrents but credits or merits that make her an excellent role model for spiritual aspirants. Her spiritual biography *The Life of Maria Petyt* published by her spiritual director exposes her gradual evolution from naivety to mystic life. Maria was extraordinarily open to the work of God in her soul, no matter the source. She benefited from all circumstances of life. Even when she had no immediate access to spiritual counsel, she continued to be led interiorly by God. She gradually moved from "the active life" to "inner life" and eventually to "unitive life."

### **Introduction**

The Franco-Flemish mystic, Maria Petyt, several years before her death in 1667, in Mechelen (now in Belgium) wrote her spiritual autobiography at the behest of her spiritual director, Carmelite Father Michael of St Augustine. He eventually published this work, known in short as *The Life of Maria Petyt*. The lengthier title was *The Life of the Reverend Mother Maria of Saint Teresa (née Petyt) of the Third Rule of the Order of the Brothers of Our Blessed Lady of Mount Carmel*. Her life astounded Father Michael, who edited not only this Life, but also several spiritual treatises culled and edited from writings his spiritual directee had shared with him.

Maria shares with her reader (originally only Father Michael) an astounding story, one that merits to be compared to the great spiritual autobiographies such as Augustine's *Confessions*, or her Carmelite patroness St Teresa of Avila's *Way of Perfection*. In it she describes her early upbringing, her challenges, her growth in maturity, and her mystical convictions. In this essay, the early life will be particularly highlighted, as a way of following Maria's consciousness of the work of God throughout her life. A significant part of this awareness was developed by her response to her spiritual guides, starting with her parents. Maria had the possible misfortune of having had some very strange instructions on the route to sanctity. Possible, only because she was most often open to the guidance she received.

Maria's story opens against the backdrop of her Catholic upbringing in what was the southern Netherlands, and is now southwest Belgium (an area that at the time was often in political upheaval). The prevalent language was Flemish, tinged with French.

### **Maria's parental influences**

Her parents were devout Catholics, whom she deeply loved, but also feared. Her father, Jan Petyt, a businessman who ran a fabric store with his wife, came from Hazebroek. Her mother, Anna Folcque, was from nearby Poperinge. Her mother was a widow when she married Jan, and Maria was the first child of this second union, being born on New Year's Day in 1623. It was a numerous family at times. There were six daughters and one son. By the time of *The Life*, Maria had only one sister still alive. Maria tells that her parents were God-fearing, and held the religious life and priestly state in great honor. The parents deliberately shielded the children from any knowledge of evil, as far as they were able. "We were brought up in great innocence," she declares. "I was so innocent and so unspoiled by people that I did not know, nor even think, that any sins would be committed in our town, nor did I even know of any sins." Such naiveté rings rather strange to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, but Maria herself never criticizes their extreme protectiveness.

Her parents were eager to live out their faith, and give their children good example as well. Maria recounts that Jan was particularly zealous in caring for people who were dying, in preparing them for a good death. This was particularly important in the light of the plague that had raged at least twice in that area. Anna was "a quiet, solitary, devout woman...very dedicated to charity and to the poor." She often distributed alms to the local needy, and became so beloved to the local

folk that when she seemed to be dying herself from the plague, the family home was surrounded by all the people who had benefited from Anna's solicitude. "They did nothing but groan and weep, because they feared losing such a good mother and benefactor." The mother would spend Sundays and holy days, after Mass was over, reading the *Lives* of the saints. For her, Sunday was not a day for visiting and gadding about. If she went anywhere, it was to church, taking Maria with her. Maria's own reaction to this is frank: "I did not have a taste for devotion as she did." We will see later, however, that this left its mark on her.

Maria's mother prayed much, and was noted to be upset when she realized that she had distractions in prayer. Businesswoman that she was, as she was in charge of the household management and accounts, this seems quite natural. "She was up to her ears in a great many affairs and concerns, for our home was a house of much business, of buying and selling, - and this depended for a large part on her." If one wants to know a person, observe what they admire. Maria claimed that her mother did everything in a praiseworthy manner, "with no affectation or attachment," always even-tempered and good-humored. Anna was a woman of few words, who inspired much confidence in those merchants who came to the house, who readily observed her integrity.

One remark may be puzzling to the reader: Maria tells that the members of the household (family and employees) and she herself had such an awe for her father especially, that "we scarcely dared speak in his presence, especially when I became a little older." At one point, when she was eight years of age, an episode of smallpox left Maria's face quite disfigured. What a challenge to her growing vanity about her appearance! Her parents did compliment her on her charm and attractiveness. Perhaps this made her a "daddy's girl" in a lot of ways (but how did this square with that fear she just spoke of?). Maria experienced the love and admiration of the people she encountered. Even as a very young girl (five or six years old), she struck up a friendship with Sisters of the Third Order of St Francis, who used to take her in for some time. "I was more like a child of the house there than in my father's house." It did not take long for these Sisters to see in her a possible candidate for their community, in spite of the fact that they had heard her tell that she had the desire to become an *enclosed* religious. They even offered her the chance to take the cell of her deceased aunt who had been a religious there. But Maria was, even at that tender age, convinced that God was calling her to a stricter, enclosed life. After all, at her first communion, she made a secret promise to give herself to God.

### Maria's early education

Maria describes her early education by her parents as being one reared in piety. It was a piety that was manifested largely in church-going, and a good character. She was kept from associating with undisciplined neighborhood children. "It displeased them intensely when I attracted children to me to play with them." So instead, her mother would offer her some jewelry, or money that she would put in a savings bank. "Every time I went to church with her, (Mother) would give me a coin." She was not to spend the money on sweets or something nice. Her mother's own disdain for such things rubbed off on Maria, as they both "despised and abhorred it, as if those who did such things were rascals and spendthrifts." So here we might well wonder about the mixed messages Maria thus received: she was given bribes of money ...but she was not to spend the money on things she wanted or she was listed among the reprobate. As a result of this, and possibly as an understandable reaction, Maria goes through a period she describes in hindsight as "worldly." She began to flaunt her attractiveness, becoming something of a flirt for a while. Yet, she was still moved to join the religious state with some Augustinian sisters in Ghent. They thought she had a beautiful voice, and wanted her for their choir.

### An ascetical confessor

Her Father Confessor imposed many mortifications on her, and "penances." At one point she was instructed to wear a penitential chain with sharp points that turned inward until the confessor instructed her she could stop. Unfortunately, six weeks went by and he had still not said anything to her to cease this sort of penance. The penitential instrument was intended to be worn only for a relatively short period of time (hours, not days). The confessor realized what he had done when he asked her how the experience had gone, and she still had the item on her body. It left scars for the rest of her life. Blind obedience was also the next lesson she was intended to learn. She also underwent variously periods of insomnia and somnolence, the latter occurring at times she should have been alert. She was tested by poor eyesight, however, and eventually left that community. Her father wanted to put her in a convent of the Urbanist (Clares) in Ypres, but her confessor put a stop to that. So she stays in Ghent, obedient to the direction of that Father Confessor. This upset her father greatly, as he wanted her in a recognized religious community. "I feared my father exceedingly greatly. His heart eventually softens and she is allowed to continue in the way she thought she was being led.

The Father Confessor gave her and a Spiritual Daughter (a young woman who became a companion to Maria) a Carmelite *Way of Life* to follow, to organize their lives quite strictly. An example of that adherence to obedience without question comes in an incident in which the confessor exasperatedly told the Sister Companion that she was so holy that she should go stand on the altar! When Maria was questioned about this, she replied that she should do exactly as the confessor said, no questions asked. After this, the confessor realized he had to watch more carefully what he told his two directees.

The sisters would take turn exercising each other in mortification, and so her fellow sister would send Maria out to market in rags, dressed as a serving maid, to humiliate her. Maria did it without question. Then the confessor ordered the two to exchange bedrooms and beds every week. He also, on the model of Carmelite detachment, removed the crucifix and any devotional items from them. Their fasting was meant to be perpetual; by way of exception, once a year they were allowed to have wine and a little more food. To make a long story short, she moved to Mechelen, and lived in a beguinaige there.

### Carmelite life in the third order and a new confessor

Profession time came, and Maria chose St. Teresa as her patroness, after St Teresa of Avila. She had four years to prepare, and she received a new spiritual director. This marks a significant turning point in her spiritual life: under his direction, she began "to work and exercise the earth of my soul" in the spirit of the Carmelite Order. So much that had gone on to date in her life had been restricted to externals. Spirituality seemed more a matter of mortification, of killing any human tendencies. Under his direction, the Christ-centered spirit of the Order, - nay, Christianity itself, began to reveal itself to Maria in ways that she had not been conscious of before. It came as a great enlightenment to her, a liberation, a revelation, a joy hitherto unknown. This spiritual father was Michael of St. Augustine, of the Carmelite Order. He recognized in Maria her great potential and did all he could to help her to discover the inner riches of the spiritual life.

This Father "was then a lector in philosophy" and chosen by the two women after much prayer. Maria gratefully comments: "I was not deceived in my good opinion and hope; I found even much more than I had expected from him." He told Maria that her foundation in asceticism was simply that, a foundation: "You have built well as to the heights, but not as to the depths." He thought it would be good to start over, from zero! Now it is *Christ* who is the focal point of her

efforts. She has begun to move from law to gospel. Maria remains as pliable as ever under his direction.

### Experience of dark night

One of the first challenges was her letting go of the effort of meditation. She found herself in a state of great aridity for at least a year. "Prayer was very difficult for me at that time." At this time, she is undergoing more interior purification, especially through what she called an attack of "spiritual jealousy." When she would see in others qualities that surpassed her own, it became unbearable. She would weep and give way to great sadness. She couldn't stand herself. She tells her confessor to stop giving her his instructions (it pained her too much interiorly to hear what he had to say), but he did not comply. The Father Confessor began to teach her the concept of inward mortification - a new concept for her - as she had known extreme outward testing already. This led to her greater understanding of the meaning of "poverty of spirit."

She begins to note down her confessor's instructions more regularly. Then, as often happens in religious life, the confessor is sent to live elsewhere. This in itself sometimes constitutes something of a crisis. She continues receiving his instructions by mail. Maria recounts a period of great testing. She is accused by her confessor as being a wastrel. Then a gossip in town began to spread wicked tales about her. All this served to loosen her from any attachment she might have had to that spiritual director. In God's providence, more sisters came to join her in Mechelen and a small community joins itself around her. But this does not last for her. The solitary life eventually wins out as she lived in Mechelen, in a little hermitage near the Carmelite church there. She describes shortly thereafter an episode of undergoing the classical "night of the soul." This lasted several years, along with diabolical temptations and attacks. When her spiritual father was absent, she had no one to open up to about her soul - another form of purification. She recounts having had a great aversion to living, to the place where she lived, to her spiritual father, to confession. No wonder she felt listed among the damned.

The period of experiencing intense union with God ensued. As in all spiritual experience, it is not lived as an entirely glowing event. The light is interspersed with darkness from time to time, all leading to greater closeness to the object of her love, Christ. Her autobiography continues for several more chapters after this, but her confessor is not mentioned again. She appears to be taught interiorly by God. Father Michael was right in telling her that she had needed to experience the depths, not only the heights.

### Some Conclusions

What observations might be made about the spiritual journey that Maria traveled up to this point?

**One:** one can say that Maria was extraordinarily open to the work of God in her soul, no matter the source. She had no complaints about her parents' strictness, or about their ultra-protectiveness. God was in it all. But holiness in the beginning appeared to be associated with feats of asceticism, not with supernatural love. For her, that desire for God's will acted like a radar, directing her inexorably to the heart of God.

**Two:** she was able to be critical of herself by seeing herself as clearly and dispassionately as possible. She never bemoans her own weaknesses, but rather takes them for granted. This is not a case of complacency, but of humility: knowing who she is before God.

**Three:** it did not make a great difference whether the influences in her life were from parents, nuns, beguines, or confessors. As the twig is bent, so grows the tree. She benefited from all circumstances of life. We ourselves might find it deplorable that she had such a strait-jacketed familial education, or such a spiritual guide as the one that turned her to mortification almost exclusively. We might let ourselves become upset by the bad and unjust treatment accorded her by gossips, sisters, her own father (at times), and confessor. For those who love God, all things work to the good.

**Four:** it is somehow striking to the modern reader that there is little or no mention made of Scripture, sacraments, or even the Liturgy of the Eucharist. After a cursory mention that she was rewarded for her assiduous church-going (rewarded by a coin!), she might even give us the impression that she was untouched by these. The Sacrament of Penance, however, was closely linked with spiritual direction in her era, so while we might wonder how her spiritual life would look had she been exposed to a more liturgical and scriptural spirituality, it is rash for us to judge.

**Five:** her practice of spiritual discernment brought her to testing each situation in which she found herself. Was God really leading her here? There? Her father wanted her in a known and appreciated convent. The Franciscan sisters wanted her to join them. The Augustinian sisters had appreciated her musical abilities. She had to decide among many influences which were beckoning her from this side and from that. The choice of a solitary life seemed to become evident to her very early on.

**Six:** the time it takes for spiritual maturation is a matter of God's providence. In her life, one can gain insights into the way God acts even in children. For Maria, approximately half her life was spent in ascetic exercises that can seem to us like "spinning her wheels." After 1646, she went from what the great Flemish spiritual master (Augustinian prior) Jan van Ruusbroec would call "the active life" to "inner life" and eventually "unitive life." And as he taught, each succeeding "life" still contains the preceding "lives." While the purification continued, her own efforts gradually subsided and the helm of her spiritual boat was guided more and more exclusively by God.

**Seven:** the influence of the long spiritual tradition of the Catholic Church became evident in her writings. Her autobiography itself does not mention it, but her spiritual advisor, Father Michael of St Augustine, himself a great leader in the Carmelite tradition, tells us that she became familiar not only with the spirituality of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, but also that of Jan van Ruusbroec, Meister Eckhart, and John Tauler. Through Father Michael, her spirit was led out into the open air, where she could at last breathe free and expansively. Even when she had no immediate access to spiritual counsel, she continued to be led interiorly by God.

**Eight:** we learn that her prayer life deeply affected those about her, especially as she grew in holiness. She prayed for those about her to such a degree that, in spite of her solitary life, her holy life and eventual death were recognized with gratitude by throngs of people in Mechelen even as they mourned her passing. She has been named "venerable" by the Church. Once her corpus of spiritual writings becomes better known, even in her own land, we may be finding a new "doctor of the Church" in the area of spirituality.

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# The Clash of Transcendence and History: The Conversion of Óscar Arnulfo Romero (Part – I)

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### *Abstract*

Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez (1917–1980), a Salvadoran bishop, lived during a time of great political and civil turbulence. The local Roman Catholic Church did regrettably little to quell the suffering of its people. Romero, in the earliest part of his episcopacy, and like the bishops around him, fell into this kind of complacency. Yet all of this was to shift radically for Romero as a result of events in 1977, when he changed from an introverted conservative to an outspoken champion of his people. This article is a theological analysis, one of many possible analyses, of how such a change, such a conversion, can be framed within the tradition of Christian spirituality: in the clash of transcendence and history, that is, an understanding that God meets God's people in the events of their lives – even in tragic events, as witnessed in the people of El Salvador – is conversion wrought. What is special about Romero's conversion in the clash of transcendence and history, as suggested by this article, is its similarity to the lives of those whom the Church has come to know as mystics. Romero, in the end, gave his all to become the very face of God for his own people, for the people of Latin America, and now for the whole world. The sign of a mystic, martyr, and saint indeed.