

Rose of Lima: some thoughts on purity and penance*

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Rose of Lima was born in Peru in 1586 and died in 1617 at the age of thirty-one. She was canonised in 1671 – the first American-born saint of the Roman Catholic Calendar – and was named principal patron of South America and the Philippines.

She remains a popular saint, not just in her native Peru, but until very recently in Europe also. There are innumerable holy cards and representations of her. She is usually shown wearing a religious habit (although she was never a nun) and either surrounded by or wearing garlands of roses. She has a modest expression and a pale sweet face. Infantilized, she used to appear regularly in hagiographical volumes, especially those designed for the edification of small girls.

All this is extremely odd. It has very little to do with her life, and they would be bizarre parents or catechetists who really wanted the girls in their charge to emulate Rose of Lima in any very direct way. Although such volumes endeavour valiantly to stress her various charitable works, especially among the enslaved and oppressed Indians, and her experiences of a mystical marriage to Christ, Rose of Lima's real claim to fame and sanctity was the extraordinary life of violent and self-inflicted penance which she maintained from extremely early in her childhood until she died.

It was no less astonishing that she should find room on her emaciated body to engrave in it, by her discipline, the wounds of the son of God ... she gave herself such blows that her blood sprinkled the walls ... and as she practised this penance daily every night she reopened her bleeding wounds by making new ones ... Her confessor having ordered her to use an ordinary discipline and leave off her iron chain,

*This text first appeared in *Through the Devil's Gateway*, Alison Joseph, London: SPCK, 1990, pp.60–70.

she made it knot three rows and wore it round her body ... This chain soon took the skin off and entered so deeply into her flesh that it was no longer visible ... She bound her arms from the shoulder to the elbow with thick cords ... she rubbed herself with nettles ... [in her full length hair shirt] she appeared more glorious in the eyes of God from her having armed it underneath with a great quantity of points of needles to increase her suffering by this ingenious cruelty ... She exposed the soles of her feet at the mouth of the oven ... she drank gall and rubbed her eyes therewith ... in her ardent desire for suffering she made herself a silver circlet in which she fixed three rows of sharp points in honour of the thirty-three years that the Son of God lived upon earth ... she wore it underneath her veil to make it the more painful as these points being unequally long did not all pierce at the same time ... so that with the least agitation these iron thorns tore her flesh in ninety-nine places ... To keep herself from sleep she suspended herself ingeniously upon a large cross which hung in her room ... and should this fail she attached her hair [the one lock she had not shaved off] to the nail in the feet of her Christ so that the least relaxation would inflict terrible suffering on her ... [She constructed herself a bed so excruciatingly painful that] although she was very generous, still she never placed herself upon it without trembling and shuddering ... so violent was the emotion which the inferior [i.e. her body] manifested at the sight of the pain it was to endure ... Rose represented forcibly the necessity she felt of suffering this continual martyrdom in order to be conformable to her divine spouse.¹ Etc., etc., etc.

This sort of 'fanatical' asceticism is currently not well received in intellectual theological circles, although popular piety is slower to abandon its old allegiances. It smacks deeply, to us post-Freudians, of the neurotic. Interestingly, fashions in asceticism do come and go. Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena, both of whom 'indulged' in rigorous self-discipline (and indeed it was on Catherine of Siena that Rose of Lima modelled her own life style), are none the less deeply respected. In 1970 – that is, since the reforms of the Roman Catholic Church instituted by the Second Vatican Council – they have both, unlike any other women saints, been honoured by the Church with the title of Doctor. At the same time both are frequently much admired by women looking for rôle models within the Christian tradition.

¹ F.W. Faber, *The Saints and Servants of God*, London, 1847, pp. 27–45 (mine is a minute sampling). Faber's biography of Rose of Lima is in fact a translation and abridgement of J.B. Feuillet's French translation of an Italian text based on original Spanish evidence.

In a similar way the Desert Fathers, whose ascetical practices frequently seem to pass into the range of farce, are regarded at least with affection and more often with deep admiration, partly of course because of the delightful anecdotality that has collected around them, and is known to us through the works of writers like Helen Waddell. Francis of Assisi maintains an astonishingly high position of regard in the hearts of many Christians who would comfortably condemn Rose of Lima, despite the fact that as well as chatting to wolves and birds, his own asceticism, and that laid on his followers, was ferocious and absolute.

Now it is true that all these examples of Christian virtue had other things to offer than a rigorous asceticism and a rather overt and physical way of acting this out. Rose of Lima wrote no spiritual works; influenced, in her time at least, no worldly powers; reformed no evil Church authorities; fought no public battles; and lived anyway in a Third World country thousands of miles from the centre of things. Her life really was that of one of the *anawim*, the 'little ones' of God – and the distaste that many of us feel for her is rather like a similar distaste for Thérèse of Lisieux. Magnificence is admirable if not always comprehensible, humility is very unattractive to the modern Western mind.

The usual ways of dealing with such individuals is to ignore them, or to 'diagnose' them psychoanalytically, or to use them as 'proof' of the misogyny of the Church authorities.² All three of these approaches, and especially the second and third, do have their validity. Nothing of what I am going to attempt to say should in any way be read as denying the value of psychoanalysis nor as implying that the Church has not been, and continues to be, deeply misogynistic in ways that are damaging both to women and to the Church itself. Only two years ago I myself wrote an essay³ which uses all three of these mechanisms directly about Rose of Lima: it diagnoses her 'problem' as a sado-masochistic relationship to God, it relates this causally to a religious culture which is viciously sexist and heterosexist, and it suggests that we deal with all this by growing up

² What I am trying to say in this essay, could also be applied to a number of other saints, mostly from a slightly earlier, medieval period; and indeed my thinking on this subject has been formed by the historical work of e.g. Caroline Bynum in her book *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (Berkeley and London, University of California Press, 1987). My selection here of Rose of Lima is quite personal and arises more from work I have been doing on colonialism and religion than any conviction that she is a unique or even a very special case.

³ 'Passionate Prayer: Masochistic Images in women's experience', in Linda Hurcombe (ed.), *Sex and God: Some varieties of women's religious experience*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987, pp. 125–40.

into spiritual maturity and putting such alarming eccentricities behind us.

The limits of this approach are extremely simple: Rose of Lima did not have a problem. I may have a problem, but that is a very different matter. It is important I think to distinguish these two quite carefully. The lives of the saints are of course available for me, or anyone else, to use in our own journeyings. There is plenty of psychoanalytical data to suggest that modern women do have a complicated relationship with sexuality involving guilt and pain of complex kinds; inasmuch as these relationships constitute barriers in the growth of a person she should seek such healing as she may be able to find. Some of that healing lies in understanding the history of both her own (Western, Christian, dualist) culture and of the construction of gender. Some of that healing lies in setting free the imagination, in using icons and images wherever they may be found, in exploring the tenuous patterns of meaning laid down in lives which no longer have a social context fully comprehensible to us. But we must not confuse any of that with a static universalist understanding of the personality, nor – out of respect for the women of our past as well as out of respect for the truth – simply write over their self-identity.

Rose of Lima did not have a problem. Quite simply, there is no evidence that this young woman had a problem as we would define it. She was not miserable; she certainly was not coerced into her life style (quite the contrary, her family made considerable effort to dissuade her, and even the Church authorities of her time were not encouraging); she was not psychopathic, in the sense that she did not inflict sufferings on other people; she was the recipient of quite remarkable consolations,⁴ including that highest of all delights, the conviction of the ‘mystical marriage’, in which Christ takes the soul directly as his spouse, and a loving one at that.

Jesus Christ several times appeared to her with a sweet and gracious countenance, saying to her to rouse her courage, “remember my love, that the bed of the cross on which I died for love of you was harder, narrower and more painful than that on which you are now lying”.⁵

Moreover she had the real comfort of knowing that her community appreciated what she was doing; more, her life excited such admiration that after her death the interment had to be delayed for some days for fear of riots. An archbishop presided at her requiem

⁴ ‘Consolations’ is the semi-technical term to describe graces or ‘rewards’ given by God direct to the aspiring soul.

⁵ Faber, p. 45.

and her bier was carried through the city by leading members of the civil authorities.

Even if we now find it difficult to accept that these were real or substantial recompenses for the life she had chosen to live we cannot reasonably question that *she* did.

Moreover if we wish to interpret ‘consolations’ in a rather more modern way we cannot but admire the efficiency with which she took control of her own life. The immediate and natural recourse of a woman set on a highly militant search after holiness, an escape from marriage and its social duties and a private life, would have been to enter a convent. In adolescence Rose of Lima seriously considered this option, but in fact was led by her own inner genius to reject it in favour of a hut in her own garden. It is true that by this choice she sacrificed a community life, which has for many women proved nourishing, but she also gained in personal freedom. All the evidence suggests that she had her confessor wrapped around her little finger: while claiming the complete obedience appropriate to her spiritual supervisor she in fact got round every attempt he ever made to make her moderate her life style; she persuaded him to confer his blessing and approval on her choices. By eliminating the formal codes of obedience which in the conventual life she would have owed to her mother superior *and* to the canons of her order *and* to episcopal authority, she was able to claim a more radical obedience, an obedience to God alone. By constructing her life the way she did, she evaded many of the usual controls and sanctions that governed the lives of women, her obedience was given directly to God, and her claim was that only she could interpret that obedience. In short she obtained a remarkable degree of autonomy. So much so that at one point she was actually investigated by the Inquisition – in its mildest form – who were however unable to discipline or control her life. In their report they noted that, despite her lack of education, they were unable to find any of her practices heretical and

They also remarked with astonishment a sort of combat between God and her without being able to determine whether God was more occupied in seeking in the secrets of his wisdom the means of exercising her by suffering than she was disposed to suffer for his love; for she showed an incredible avidity for crosses and an invincible patience over her trials and over every affliction which Almighty God sent to exercise her love and fidelity.⁶

In summary, she had not only slipped away from their definitions of appropriate female behaviour, she also forced them to acknowledge

⁶ Faber, p. 71.

a strange and unexpected relationship of equality between her and her God.

Finally Rose of Lima also had the great consolation of believing that she was doing a socially useful job – and there were not many of these available for women in the early seventeenth century. Even the somewhat pietistic Alban Butler in his *Lives of the Saints* acknowledges this:

We admire a St Bennet on briers, a St Bernard freezing in the ice, and a St Francis in the snow, these saints were cruel to themselves not to be overcome by the devil; but Rose punishes herself to preserve others.⁷

Once again the theology on which her understanding of her own life was clearly based is one that is not deeply sympathetic to us now; nonetheless it was a deeply social, corporate and incarnational way of seeing the world. To make oneself a ‘victim of God’s justice’, to perform penances greater than one’s own sins had ‘earned’, was to set that additional penance ‘free’ for someone else to ‘use’ for their salvation. Rose of Lima’s own understanding of this has clear biographical origins which are worth noting.

Her family, although Spanish in origin, were not among the aristocratic European-based élite. They were petty colonialists with a difficult position to maintain in a highly stratified, snobbish boom town on the world’s frontiers. Their financial status seems to have varied at different times in her life from the reasonably comfortable to the distinctly shabby genteel. In her childhood her father was obliged to take a job, not in the colonial administration which would have been more or less acceptable, but as a manager of one of the Peruvian silver mines. At this point Peru had been conquered by Spain, in the name of Christ, for the exploitation of its mineral wealth (gold and silver) for less than fifty years. (‘Why did you come to the New World?’ one conquistador was once asked. ‘To save souls for God and to get very rich,’ was his straightforward answer.) The economic and political complexities of European history which made the brutal exploitation of native South American Indians so attractive to Spain need not be gone into here, but in the silver mines Rose of Lima saw, at first hand, one of the most squalid examples of materialism and petty colonialism, and also one of the most defeated and culturally mutilated people that history offers us. Above all, from her point of view, they had not been converted from their fierce and dangerous gods to the love and freedom that the Holy Catholic Church was supposed to confer. Rose of Lima herself did not write her memoirs,

⁷ A. Butler, *Lives of the Saints*, 1949 edition, ed. B. Kelly, London, Virtue and Co. Ltd., Vol. III, p. 1056.

or anything else, so her subjective understanding of this painful phenomenon is not really known; what is known is that she offered her life explicitly for the conversion and salvation of those suffering people – one of the reasons, obviously, why she later seemed an appropriate patron for the New World. (It is simply not true that all Spanish colonialists were brutal, arrogant exploiters of the indigenous peoples; there was a great deal of theological questioning and guilt and struggle around this issue, as the lives of such men as Bartolomé de las Casas makes clear.) Ideas of salvation and conversion were of course inextricably linked in Rose of Lima's culture; and this clear, driving sense of purpose in her life must not be underestimated if she is to reveal anything to us in a historical sense.

And I think it is very easily underestimated by twentieth-century minds. The temptation to believe that what is most modern is also best – to see human history as a steady progress in knowledge and truth, probably culminating about wherever one happens oneself to be located – has always been almost irresistible, and popularised – if crude – evolutionary theory has, since the last century, added to what seems an historically continual tendency. Its frequency however does not make it right. Believing that people were always like we are, they just didn't understand themselves as well as we do, leads to dangerous historical inaccuracies. Peter Brown in his most recent and profoundly important book *Body and Society*⁸ demonstrates movingly how sexuality had so different a social meaning from what it now carries that the sexual abstinences, the noisy and sometimes virulent demands for chastity and virginity, within the early Church, far from being a symptom of self-hatred and dualism, were a radical political claim to the coming of the Kingdom: a claim which women, sometimes even more than men, could make. Likewise Caroline Bynum, in *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, her book about medieval women religious, pours a rigorous historian's scorn on the idea that the extreme penitential fastings of some of these women can really be diagnosed as anorexic, or as any other sort of neurosis (as proposed for example by Rudolph Bell in *Holy Anorexia*):⁹ not merely are the case histories inadequate, but these women's understanding of their bodies, of their relationship to Christ, of their right to participate in his sufferings, of their sense of identity, their very selves, was formed in a social environment so different from our own that nothing is to be gained by reading off their lives in this way rather than exploring in proper detail what it was they did feel and think. She arrives,

⁸ Peter Brown, *Body and Society*, London, Faber and Faber, 1989.

⁹ Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, University of Chicago Press, 1985.

convincingly, at a much more positive – for the women in question – interpretation; but also one which allows the writings and lives of these women to have a depth and dimension *for us* which was simply not available in many cases while we insisted on trying to see them as sexual victims of appalling restrictions of personal freedom: to see them as though they were us.

Although I do not begin to claim the sort of historical breadth of either Brown or Bynum, I do believe that their approach is not only helpful but necessary if we are going, as we must, to use the lives of women before us to encourage us forward. In the case of Rose of Lima, who is simply a very extreme and therefore very demanding example of a more widespread phenomenon, it seems that we must at least understand, even if we do not wish to reclaim and emulate, the ideas about purity which governed her life. Purity has, rightly, become something of a bugbear to contemporary women: our purity has become men's concern and in its name they have radically restricted our options and liberties. (At a meeting I attended recently about Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* someone said, 'You do not understand how we have been insulted; it is as though someone had raped my daughter.' This complex linking of women's purity, cultural identity, and religious integrity is something which women obviously need to unknot.) But this idea of 'purity' as something that needs *preserving*, by others, and for others, is quite different from a purity which needs *finding*, indeed which must be searched for, struggled for, hunted down as the precious thing it is. Purity here is not a state of life, an innate condition, but a virtue – something that must be sought, found and won. The etymological connection between 'pure', 'purge' and 'purgatory' becomes clear when the word is understood in this context.

'Blessed are the pure in heart,' the Beatitudes say, 'for they shall see God' (Matt. 5.8). This 'seeing God', a project not just for the afterlife, not just 'jam tomorrow', was the high ambition of anyone who took up a penitential life. Rose of Lima's mystical marriage to Jesus, his visits to her, her direct sense of his immediate and corporeal presence, was understood by her and her contemporaries as a direct reward, and more than a compensation, for the violence of her own purification.

The Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who on finding one pearl of great price went and sold all that he had and bought it.

(Matt. 13.45–6)

(It is useful to understand here that in the ancient middle east pearls were among the most precious of gems and were highly esteemed as

personal ornaments. Hence they are used throughout the Bible, and other classical literature, to represent metaphorically anything of great value, and particularly wise sayings. In medieval Christianity they became more specifically a symbol of purity, not just because of their gentle lustre, but still more because they were grown secretly and, it was believed, with *personal suffering* by the oyster.)

Teilhard de Chardin expressed this understanding of purity not as something passive, but as something both actively gained and worthwhile in itself, in his phrase, 'Purity does not lie in separation from, but in deeper penetration into, the universe.' The problem, particularly for women of such limited resources as Rose of Lima, is how do you, given the restrictions, go about this great work of 'penetrating the universe'?

This image is a particularly appropriate one in Rose of Lima's case. The 'penetration of the universe' in physical terms was going on around her. She was born in Peru less than fifty years after its conquest. The interior of the Americas, beyond the great mountains east of Lima, was still a mystery, but a mystery that brave men were challenging: with immense courage and endurance they set out on travels both dangerous and dazzling. The year she died Sir Walter Raleigh was in South America, on his last ill-fated search for Eldorado: he had, like many of his contemporaries, quite literally put his life on the line to find this worldly paradise. As a child Rose of Lima had watched a different version of the 'penetration of the universe', as the silver mines were sunk deeper and deeper into the mountains, at high risk, in search of treasure.

These brave adventures were only open to men, and their treasure was a worldly one. But the excitement of their explorations, and the promises of hidden treasure to be gained through courage and perseverance, inevitably affected religious language. Both Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the founder of the Jesuits, and Teresa of Avila (1515–82), the radical reformer of the Carmelites, used imagery of exploration and honour to inspire and explain their own radical innovations.

For women who wished to join in this mood of excited expansionist exploration there was an alternative. The exploration could be made into oneself. Caroline Bynum has suggested that the association of women with nature was, at least for thirteenth-century religious, not the negative image that it now seems, but a positive source of spiritual strength and energy.¹⁰ It does not seem wildly improper to apply this to Rose of Lima three hundred years later.

¹⁰ Caroline Bynum, 'Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the thirteenth century', in *Women's Studies II*, Nos 1 & 2, Berkeley, 1984, pp. 179–214.

Here, on one's own flesh, the universe could be 'penetrated', explored, known, and here the treasure of purity, the pearl of great price, could be discovered. And once discovered could be used to 'buy off' God's justice; could be used to save not only oneself but other suffering souls also.

Rose of Lima left no documentation of her own life. There is no literature or imagery available for analysis. This has however not deterred previous hagiographers. F.M. Capes in *The Flower of the New World* (1899) and F.P. Keyes *The Lily and the Rose* (1962) have sentimentalized her. F.W. Faber seems to have a strangely voyeuristic pleasure in her sufferings. Contemporary feminist writers have seen her rather as a demonstration of the extreme body hatred and guilt that a patriarchal religion lays upon women.¹¹ All I wish to do here is to suggest that there are other ways of understanding or looking at extremes of penitential life which can suggest in them sources, not of neurotic repression but of freedom and self-ownership.

Pure: Not mixed with anything else; free from adulteration, unimpaired. Without foreign or extraneous admixture; free from anything not properly pertaining to it; homogeneous, unalloyed.¹²

¹¹ See e.g. my own article cited above in note 3.

¹² Oxford English Dictionary.