

What About

Therese Neumann?

A Concise Background for
and Analysis of
the Critical Reception
accorded

Hilda C. Graef's

The Case of Therese Neumann

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On April 16, 1951, the Newman Press of Westminster, Maryland, published an American edition of Hilda C. Graef's **The Case of Therese Neumann**. The appearance of this book has occasioned a great deal of controversy, spearheaded by Dr. Max Jordan, whose series of three N. C. W. C. syndicated articles reached a wide audience. To acquaint interested American readers with the fuller context of Konnersreuth literature, and to summarize for these readers the opinions of critics and reviewers concerning **The Case of Therese Neumann**, the publisher has asked its editorial consultant, the Reverend Leonard J. Fick, Ph. D., head of the department of English at the Pontifical College Josephinum, Worthington, Ohio, to prepare a simple and factual report on the present status of the controversy. The following pages constitute that report.

I

Henri Gheon, the noted biographer of the Cure of Ars, once remarked that the "Church is rather cautious about saints. . . . She canonizes them afterwards, but she is rather distrustful at the time. . . . Nothing so closely resembles a true saint as a false saint."

This extreme caution and reserve maintained by the Church with regard to phenomena reputedly supernatural and miraculous finds its classic and most official expression in Pope Benedict XIV's *De Beatificatione et Canonizatione Sanctorum* — *On the Beatification and Canonization of Saints* — which "not only authorizes, but advises us to observe all the facts that might seem abnormal and disconcerting, and to seek perseveringly a natural origin and explanation."

Miss Hilda C. Graef, author of *The Way of the Mystics* as well as of *The Case of Therese Neumann*, has acted upon this authorization and advice of Pope Benedict XIV. She seeks perseveringly and, be it said, somewhat relentlessly for "a natural origin and explanation" of the strange occurrences at Konnersreuth.

Briefly, her conclusion is the following:

a supernatural origin of the phenomena exhibited by Therese Neumann is not necessarily demanded by the evidence at our disposal which, admittedly, is not as

complete, in many respects, as one might desire. [Nevertheless, we must] affirm . . . that the greatest caution and circumspection ought to be exercised by anyone who approaches this case with the intention of a serious investigation; for even if the stigmata and the other events be not considered mystical but charismatic gifts, the fact that they have appeared in connection with illnesses certified by the examining doctors as hysterical in nature and do not correspond with similar experiences in the history of the Church's saints would still justify a reasonable doubt.

This conclusion, Miss Graef affirms, is logically defensible in the light of her investigations. These investigations, and their pertinent results, may be readily summarized under three heads:

1. Prior to the period in which the extraordinary phenomena associated with her began to appear, Therese experienced a series of illnesses which four doctors unanimously diagnosed as proceeding from a "very grave hysteria."

2. The medical records in certain cases of hysteria, catalepsy, and telepathy describe phenomena which closely parallel the phenomena associated with Therese Neumann.

3. There is an essential lack of correspondence between Therese's experiences and attitudes and similar experiences and attitudes of the Church's canonized stigmatics.

The results of her study and investigation along these lines, Miss Graef asserts, fully justify her conclusion.

II

Now this theory advanced by Miss Graef in *The Case of Therese Neumann*, and the arguments in support of it, come as somewhat of a shock to American readers for the very simple reason that the Konnersreuth literature available to them in their language has consistently accepted and defended the view that nothing short of the miraculous can account for the unusual phenomena associated with the Bavarian stigmatic.

Typical of this literature, which, for want of a better term, may be labeled pro-Konnersreuth, is Albert Paul Schimberg's *The Story of Therese Neumann* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1948).

Representative, too, of the appraisal bestowed upon such works as that of the late Mr. Schimberg is Joseph A. Breig's essay on Therese Neumann published in the August 19, 1948, issue of *The Catholic Messenger* (Davenport, Iowa). Prior to recounting a personal incident in his own life, when, in a moment of great sorrow and suffering he sent his guardian angel to Therese's guardian angel, and instantly experienced a happiness he had never known, Mr. Breig writes:

Therese Neumann is more than a living miracle; she is many living miracles. She is a living crucifix, the mirror of Christ on the Cross.

And later:

she is the greatest hero now living; she is a tall figure even among the spiritual greats of the past who have drawn in the cause of Christ the invincible sword of unselfishness, the sword that forever is shaped like a cross.

Yet in no European country has the literature on the question been so one-sided. The Germans and the French, for example, have long had at their command detailed reports which tend to anticipate Miss Graef's findings.

For over the years since 1923 — Therese's first cure took place on April 29 of that year — such able and qualified observers and scholars as Dr. B. de Poray-Madeyski, medical expert for the Sacred Congregation of Rites; Father Michael Waldmann, lecturer in mystical theology and parapsychology at Regensburg; Dom Alois Mager, O.S.B., professor at the Catholic University of Salzburg and the author of various learned treatises on the psychology of mysticism; the Jesuit scholar, Father Herbert Thurston; the Abbe Charles Journet, professor at the Grand Seminaire of Fribourg; the editors of and contributors to *Etudes Carmelitaines*, a highly esteemed and reliable journal on questions of mystical theology: — such men as these have long been critical, even skeptical, of this century's best known stigmatic.

Independently of Miss Graef, the Reverend Paul Siwek, S.J., research professor at Fordham University, conducted an investigation into the riddle of Konnersreuth. His conclusions, published last year in Paris under the title *Une stigmatisee de nos jours: Etude de psychologie religieuse — A Stigmatic of Our Day: A Study in Religious Psychology* — are the same as Miss Graef's:

there is "no positive evidence of supernatural intervention."

Against the backdrop of such studies as those by Father Siwek and his predecessors, *The Case of Therese Neumann* is not so shocking as it appears at first glance. In fact, Hilda C. Graef's work derives its importance largely from the fact that it presents for the first time in English a point of view entirely different from that to which the American reading public has been accustomed. And that Miss Graef is eminently fitted to make this presentation is generally admitted. Dr. Max Jordan, for example, though far from admitting the validity of her conclusions, finds no reason to question her intimate knowledge of the theology and psychology underlying mystical experience.

III

In the February 2, 1951, issue of *The Universe* (London), the Most Reverend Thomas Roberts, S.J., Archbishop of Bombay, India, discussed, at some length, *The Case of Therese Neumann*. Concerning that book, the Archbishop wrote:

it is a book far too important not to be refuted if it is not to be (substantially) accepted. The unpardonable thing would be to ignore it. . . .

This much is certain: the book has not been ignored. Leading Catholic newspapers and journals throughout the English-speaking world have commented upon Miss Graef's study, some favorably, others adversely.

The thirty-one reviews available to me, culled from British and Canadian, as well as American, periodicals, are, it would seem, of sufficient number and variety to establish the trend of the critical reception accorded the book. Of these thirty-one reviewers, twenty-six must be characterized as favorable, and most of these may readily be characterized as extremely favorable.

Among those who, presumably, read the book and passed favorable judgment upon it are the already mentioned Archbishop Thomas Roberts, S.J. (*The Universe*); W. Norris Clarke, S.J. (*The Priest*), professor of philosophy at Woodstock College; Father Fulgence, O.F.M. (*Franciscan Message*); Father John S. Kennedy (in his syndicated column "Balancing the Books"); Mr. Dan Herr (*The Voice of St. Jude*); Father Conel Dowd, C.P. (*Books on Trial*); Father C. C. Martindale, S.J. (*Duckett's Register*); Father Luigi D'Apollonia, S.J. (*The Ensign*); Father F. P. LeBuffe, S.J. (*The Messenger of the Sacred Heart*); Father Richard Kugelman (*The Sign*); Monsignor Robert G. Peters (*The Peoria Register*); and Dr. Letitia Fairfield (*The [London] Tablet*).

Now not more than one or the other of these critics thinks that Miss Graef has solved the riddle of Konnersreuth. Father Martindale, it is true, believes "her [Miss Graef's] opinion . . . incontrovertible"; and Father Clarke writes that "the solidity of the authorities on which she relies make[s] it difficult, in the mind of this reviewer [Father Clarke himself], to disagree with her main conclusions, however unexpected and unwelcome they may be to many of us." Similarly, the reviewer (G. L. D.) in *Orate Fratres* finds it difficult to avoid agreeing with her conclusion that none of the phenomena are necessarily supernatural in origin, and that some of them strongly suggest hysteria."

But for the most part, the majority of these reviewers may be said to echo the sentiments of Monsignor Robert G. Peters, editor of *The Peoria Register*, who admits that the book

has shaken practically all of my convictions, not because Miss Graef definitely proves the impossibility of the supernatural in the case [of Therese Neumann], but because she so calmly, scientifically, and authoritatively throws at least some doubt on every single aspect of the Konnersreuth story.

These critics, too, are virtually unanimous in their unstinted praise of the attitude with which the author of *The Case of Therese Neumann* approaches her subject. The book is variously characterized as "valuable and courageous" and "entirely objective" (*The Downside Review*), "careful and conservative" (*The Catholic Review*), "well argued and written with great charity in the interest of truth" (*Books on Trial*), "balanced, impartial, and critical" (*The Ensign*). Her over-all conclusions are described as "moderate and cautious" (*The Priest*), "reasonable" (*Books on Trial*), "prudent and in perfect agreement with sound theology" (*The Sign*). Father John S. Kennedy rates *The Case of Therese Neumann* "a sober, painstaking, dispassionate, a most telling piece of work."

Such reviewers as those already mentioned agree, too, in their belief that it is a very "timely" book (*The Catholic Review*, *Our Sunday Visitor*, *The Ensign*, et al.). This conviction derives, at least implicitly, from the February 4, 1951, warning issued by Monsignor Alfredo Ottaviani, Assessor of the Holy Office, against a too ready acceptance of apparitions and other "miraculous"

occurrences. Enough Americans are still hanging their heads in shame over Necedah, Heroldsbach, and Lipa to give Monsignor Ottaviani's warning a telling and continuing force. Nor is the Church itself unaware of the fact that "a craving for the marvelous seems innate in many people, and this inclines them to pronounce [as] supernatural, without any critical sense, everything which, in the spiritual order, verges upon the supernatural."

Finally, these reviewers, with some few exceptions, recommend that *The Case of Therese Neumann* be "widely and thoughtfully read" (*Books on Trial*), since it promotes "a healthy public discussion of a subject that has too long known only uncritically publicized enthusiasm" (*The Peoria Register*).

IV

While the great majority of critics and reviewers who have chosen to make their opinion public are favorably impressed by Miss Graef's study, there are those who are very decidedly opposed to her conclusions and to the methods by which she arrives at these conclusions. Five such negative reports have come to my attention.

An unsigned reviewer in *The Tablet* (Brooklyn) feels "that she tries to prove too much," that, though she "believes herself objective, there is a spirit of attack in every chapter." Thomas Langley (*The Ave Maria*) agrees with this reviewer, affirming that Miss Graef "builds up her opinion in a too-often non-objective fashion and tortures some ideas to make them fit her adverse judgment."

Integrity's account of the book, written by Carol Jackson, includes a synopsis of Montague Summers' *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*; basing herself largely on this author, Miss Jackson ends her review by indicting Hilda Graef for her "muddled pseudo-scientific thinking."

In a lengthy and somewhat violent "Examination of H. Graef's 'Sources and Facts'" (*The Wanderer*), Father George M. Fangauer, S.T.D., Ph.D., pastor of the Assumption Church, Duncan, Oklahoma, finds *The Case of Therese Neumann* "not only disappointing, but even shocking." Dr. Fangauer objects specifically to Miss Graef's use of "only one-sided and secondary sources."

Finally, Dr. Max Jordan, in his series of three N. C. W. C. syndicated articles, takes sharp issue with Miss Graef, and proves, by enumerating eminent and qualified authorities, that the Konnersreuth case is by no means settled. Dr. Jordan points out that conclusions "attesting . . . to the supernatural character of her [Therese's] experiences" have been reached by such experts as Monsignor Karl Kieffer, professor of Catholic theology at Eichstaett, Bavaria; Dr. Hubert Urban, professor of neurology and psychiatry at the University of Innsbruck; Dr. R. W. Hynek of Prague, author of several scholarly studies on the Holy Shroud of Turin; Drs. Franz Kleinschrod, Peter Radlo, and Hans Froelich.

For the rest, Dr. Jordan, even as Dr. Fangauer, maintains that Miss Graef "ignores a large part of the voluminous literature which contradicts Dr. de Poray's and her own views." At the same time, however, he credits her with either referring to or quoting from "the standard work" of Dr. Fritz Gerlich, and the books of Archbishop Teodorowicz, Albert Paul Schimberg, and

Baron Frederic von Lama, all of which present Therese Neumann's experiences in a favorable light.¹

Dr. Jordan, too, makes much of the fact that Miss Graef has never met Therese Neumann. This is an understandable error on the part of Dr. Jordan, since the chapter recounting her visit to Konnersreuth did not appear in either the Irish or the American edition of the work. This chapter, entitled "Personal Impressions of Therese Neumann," has since been published in the August 1, 1951, issue of *The Josephinum Review*. While it does not in any way bring new evidence to bear upon the case, this chapter does prove that Hilda Graef observed Therese Neumann, and spoke with her, though she had no opportunity, on the occasion of her visit, to witness the "Passion ecstasies."

It is to be regretted that both Dr. Jordan and Dr. Fangauer, who are in the forefront of the present controversy, should have weakened their case by implying that those who, like Miss Graef, seek for a natural explanation of the occurrences at Konnersreuth are tinged with rationalism (Dr. Jordan) or are playing into the hands of the Freemasons who supposedly have formed

¹ More recently, Monsignor Matthew Smith, editor-in-chief of the *Register* system of newspapers, devoted his "Listening In" column for August 17, 1951, to *The Case of Therese Neumann*. Monsignor Smith agrees that this is "a learned and in many ways a devastating book," but finds it extremely weak in certain important particulars, four in number. "I am not convinced by Miss Graef's book," writes Monsignor Smith, "for that author . . . does not face the fundamental problems of stigmatism, which certainly cannot be disposed of on the simple grounds of hysteria." The editorial, in a significant statement of its "whole purpose," repeats what all other reviewers have already made abundantly clear: "that, just as a book like the late Albert Schimberg's or Archbishop Teodorowicz's does not close the question in favor of the miraculous, so a book like Miss Graef's is not the final word against Therese."

a "common front against Konnersreuth" (Dr. Fangauer). After all, such opponents as Fathers Thurston and Siwek, Abbe Charles Journet, and Dom Alois Mager are deserving of the same "tolerance and charity" which, Dr. Jordan admits, Miss Graef has expressed toward those who do not share her views. It should not be looked upon as an indication of rationalism or anti-Catholicism to heed the advice of Pope Benedict XIV "to seek perseveringly a natural origin and explanation" of "all the facts that might seem abnormal or disconcerting."

V

This much has been established: there is considerable room for discussion of the whole Konnersreuth problem. Nor have the many essays called forth in recent months by the publication of the Graef book contributed, in any great degree, to a more balanced understanding of the problem. To note but one instance: Miss Graef is, it would seem, manifestly weak in her cavalier dismissal of Therese's complete fast. Her opponents have been quick to note this weakness. At the same time, they themselves have just as cavalierly disregarded the strange inconsistencies in Therese's own account of her expiatory suffering for a seminarian afflicted with a throat ailment.

It need scarcely be mentioned that Rome has issued no official pronouncement regarding Konnersreuth. In 1937, it is true, after Therese's father had refused to submit to the demands of the whole Bavarian episcopate and the concurrent desire of the Sacred Congregation of the

Holy Office for a second investigation into her complete fast, the Regensburg diocesan authorities published an official notice declaring that they "can take no responsibility for the reality of the alleged inedia [complete fast] and for the character of other extraordinary happenings at Konnersreuth. Until, therefore, matters have been cleared up by another investigation, no more permits for visits to Therese Neumann are issued." Since that time, no such second investigation has taken place. Nor, to my knowledge, has a demand for such an investigation been pressed by the local Church authorities. But neither has the official episcopal declaration of 1937 been revoked.

It is to be noted, finally, that nowhere does Hilda Graef attack or call into question the sincerity and good faith of Therese Neumann or of anyone connected with her. Nowhere does she claim to have passed final and definitive judgment on the case of Therese Neumann. On the contrary, it should not be forgotten that her conclusions are moderate and tentative almost to an extreme.

The value of *The Case of Therese Neumann* lies in the fact that it "promotes a healthy discussion of a subject that has long known only uncritically publicized enthusiasm." For it shows that there are other possibilities than those which the American reading public has been led to accept. Miss Hilda C. Graef forcefully raises an important question: Are the phenomena associated with Therese Neumann *necessarily* supernatural? Her tentative answer, given after due study and investigation, is in the negative. The final answer is yet to be given.

THE CASE OF THERESE NEUMANN. By Hilda C. Graef. Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1951. \$2.50.

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