

MOTHER ANGELICA'S EXTRAORDINARY WITNESS

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Raymond Arroyo, *Mother Angelica: Her Grand Silence: The Last Years and Living Legacy* (New York: Image, 2016)

In his previous biography on Mother Angelica, Raymond Arroyo brought us into personal contact with her extraordinary life. He took us through not only her remarkable accomplishments, but the seemingly insurmountable challenges she had to overcome in achieving them, and how God's intervention in her life put her on this lifelong journey of faith to achieve eternal union with Him—not just for herself, but for countless millions of souls whom she never even knew, but who came to know her.

One expects this final work, then, to recount how she died. And it does that. But anyone who thinks this is simply the telling of a moving story about a remarkable earthly life passing quietly into eternity is in for a surprise. It is, rather, the story of how Mother Angelica in her last years, seemingly hidden away in her sickbed in a corner of Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Hanceville, Alabama, only intensified her service to God and to others. Arroyo makes a compelling case that, with her voice virtually silenced and her physical mobility gone, she may have brought more souls to Christ in those last years than in all her extraordinary years of physically active, world-wide ministry.

Surely, some of this was due to the continued growth and expanded programming of EWTN, the worldwide Catholic media network she had founded. As it reached ever more people around the world, EWTN allowed them to experience and be drawn to the faith. Indeed, it allowed whole new generations to come to

know Mother Angelica—to feel her love, receive her wisdom and guidance, and experience the depth of her personal relationship with Jesus—through the regular re-broadcasts of her own powerful preaching on “Mother Angelica Live” and other EWTN programs.

But EWTN was only part of the story of Mother Angelica’s extraordinary witness to and evangelization of the Gospel during those final, bedridden years. There was, first of all, her determination, for as long as possible, to still be active in whatever ways she could in advancing the mission of her community. For example, she urged and inspired the sisters to establish new foundations, and she even traveled, as far away as Japan, to help gain acceptance and support for these undertakings.

But most of all there was her prayer and spiritual life: her willingness, indeed her joy, in joining her sufferings to those of her beloved spouse, Jesus, and offering them for others. In this way she gave totally of herself in service to all manner of human concerns: physical, emotional and spiritual healing for those close to her; all those around the world who asked for her help and prayers; and for millions of people with whom she had no contact, but knew to be suffering. She also offered her suffering for the successes of the work of her community, and of the Church’s worldwide evangelization efforts; for the leaders of our Church; for a world in terrible spiritual crisis; and for all whom she knew to be in need of prayer—in short, for all humanity, past, present and future, whom she longed to help into heaven through her own sacrificial suffering.

“In her protracted silence—for more than a decade,” Arroyo writes, “Mother Angelica would struggle for her soul, fight for her religious community, see the fulfillment of her last mission, and radically transform the lives of people she had never known.”

It was indeed “a grand silence.” Arroyo brings us into it, transforming us from outside observers to insiders who in a sense actually share the experience of Mother Angelica’s life, or at least the experiences of those who, like Raymond Arroyo, did share intimately in her life. He is able to do this in part, of course, because of his closeness to her, and his descriptions of their interactions as he visited and interviewed her over this last period of her life are powerful and inspiring. So too are the testimonies of some of the sisters who saw to Mother’s care in her last years, and who, through Arroyo, also generously share with us their moving personal observations and reflections.

Arroyo draws us into these extraordinary final years of Mother Angelica’s life by employing his manifest skills as an author—and one who himself lives and evangelizes the Catholic faith. So he fully understands and affirms the concept of redemptive suffering, and the deep personal holiness and fidelity to Christ and His Church that were the essence of Mother Angelica.

Her “grand silence” really began, Arroyo recounts, on Christmas Eve 2001 when a stroke caused by a brain hemorrhage nearly killed her. Having retired from EWTN the previous March, she had already planned to spend her time in the cloister, in meditative prayer, “mothering her community,” and preparing her sisters to eventually establish new monasteries elsewhere. Now her severely limited speech and movement would seemingly further enforce such a quiet, uneventful retirement.

But that was not to be. As she had her entire life, Mother Angelica struggled mightily against the challenges life had dealt her, working as always to carry forward the will of God. This led her to insist, three years later, on accompanying several members of her community on a trip to Japan to look into establishing a monastery there. It was a grueling trip, from which she returned in great pain from a fractured tailbone, resulting in her “most onerous” cross: the “abrupt

loss of mobility and independence.”

To “release the last shred of control she still possessed—her self-rule—was an extreme sacrifice,” Arroyo notes. But it was a trip the previous year—to Lourdes—that perhaps provided Mother Angelica with the spiritual strength to accept even this cross. “She traveled to the famed grotto and miraculous springs in search of healing,” Arroyo recounts. What she found instead, “in the sea of pain all around her was the spiritual strength to embrace her suffering, and to appreciate its rich value beyond the awful frustrations of the moment.” This affirmed what she had once told Arroyo: “those who continue to suffer may not be healed, because they are healers themselves.”

And so she surrendered to her own suffering, in order to heal others—physically, if that was God’s will, but more importantly, spiritually. For as Arroyo notes, while ministering throughout her life to the downtrodden, having suffered material deprivation herself, she focused her charitable work and prayers especially on the spiritually impoverished. And as this book recounts through numerous testimonies of those whose lives she touched, that special care for the spiritual health of others worked many wonders in the lives of those who, through her, found or rediscovered Jesus.

Indeed, for many readers these testimonials, carefully selected by Arroyo to give a sense of the reach and impact of Mother Angelica’s ministry—in lives touched, in healings assisted, in conversions inspired—will be the highlight of this book. Certainly many readers who also found their way through their spiritual connection to Mother Angelica will see themselves in similar stories recounted here.

Other challenges beset Mother Angelica during what Arroyo poignantly calls her “white martyrdom” of sacrificial suffering for Christ. Among those that “pained her greatly”

was disharmony among the sisters, due in part to conflicts of personality, but also deeper concerns about the future direction of the community. While she struggled in her weakened state to guide the sisters away from such division—"Support! Support!" she told one nun she heard complaining about another—this strife led to her again having to surrender to God's will, when Rome addressed the problem by appointing a new superior from outside the community.

Some of the sisters who cared for Mother Angelica are certain that they also witnessed her dealing with the most terrifying of challenges: personal confrontations with the devil. Arroyo recounts these in his chapter on her mysticism, which he traces back to a miraculous event from her childhood, when she felt herself being picked up and moved out of the path of an onrushing motor vehicle. (Witnesses marveled that they had never seen anyone "jump" so high.) The author then relates various mystical occurrences during her years of ministry—appearances to her by the Child Jesus and St. Michael the Archangel, among others, and accounts of people who insist that Mother Angelica appeared to them, in a dream or a vision, while she was still living.

Admirers of Raymond Arroyo and all he has himself done to evangelize the Gospel, at EWTN and beyond, will appreciate his willingness to share with us details of his own special relationship with Mother Angelica. That relationship, he makes clear, presented difficult challenges, particularly when Mother Angelica took it upon herself—loving him, she told him, "like a mother"—to teach him some humility. She was not above harsh words, even public humiliation, and he found himself on the receiving end of that in one particularly painful episode.

Like Mother Angelica, he responded by persevering for the greater good, and that's exactly what was achieved. He gained a "spiritual mother" who he says taught him so much. EWTN and its worldwide audience continued to benefit from his dedication and his many abilities—some of which, like his

interviewing skills, he credits Mother Angelica with enhancing. And of course, we all received the spiritual gift of his wonderful writings on Mother Angelica, made possible by the deep and warm personal relationship that developed between them.

In 2010, one of the sisters caring for Mother asked her—"impetuously," Arroyo writes—if she thought Jesus was going to take her soon or heal her.

"I don't want to live," Mother Angelica replied, but "I owe Him much." Later, as she caressed an image of the Divine Child, she uttered the words, "For the people. For the people."

"The sisters," Arroyo writes, "interpreted Mother's statements to mean that she had a personal desire to die—to be with Him—but she felt she owed the Lord a great deal and therefore would continue to suffer 'for the people.'"

When she was 20-years-old, Rita Rizzo, the future Mother Angelica, was finally relieved of years of excruciating stomach pain after a mystic advised her to pray a novena to St. Therese of the Child Jesus.

"All I wanted to do after my healing was to give myself to Jesus," she told Arroyo years later. Ultimately, she did so much more than that. For in giving herself totally to Him—surrendering always to His will—she brought countless others along with her to Jesus.

Arroyo's powerful recounting of how she evangelized the Gospel through the pain and suffering of these last years will leave readers hungry for more. Which, happily, they can find in his four previous works on Mother Angelica, detailing her extraordinary life story, her lessons on life, spirituality and the Scriptures, and her prayers and personal devotions.

"Many have written and spoken of the New Evangelization,"

Arroyo observes. "Mother Angelica was the New Evangelization."