

The Saints therefore are not extras, tacked on to our religion as a luxury for those who like such luxuries. They are integral to the very life of the Mystical Body which we share, and we communicate with them in its life and are strengthened by their example and their prayers.

We need, and do not always succeed in getting, lives of Saints that show them as they were, struggling with experiences of life similar to those we must struggle with ourselves, and sanctifying themselves through those experiences. So, being ordinary, they were able by grace to achieve the extraordinary. Yet all in a way that can aid us to imitate them in the struggle for holiness.



THE EARLY MARTYRS

DONALD ATTWATER

IT is from veneration of the early martyrs that the whole great business of the *cultus* of the saints in the Christian Church derives. Whatever the dignity and importance and interest of the saints whose festivals figure in the various calendars of the Church, those feasts must all, without exception, give place to the anniversaries of the martyrs in point of antiquity. Already in the second century the annual commemoration of St Polycarp was celebrated in Smyrna from the time of his passion; from the beginning of the third century such commemorations were becoming general.

There is nothing surprising about this. For the first three hundred years of their history Christians lived in an atmosphere of martyrdom, of witness by blood. Persecution was not continuous, and it varied in intensity from time to time and from place to place, but the possibility of being called on to die for the name of the Lord Christ was never far away; and that state of affairs, again at times and in places, has recurred ever since. Mankind was redeemed by the willing death of the incarnate Son of God, who on the third day rose from the dead: redeemed man is never so Christlike as when he willingly goes to death for his Saviour, to

await the resurrection that is to come. In those early days such a death might be the lot of any Christian; it was, and is, the ultimate indefeasible Christian right, if the call comes, to die for the Lord. And those to whom the call came and who accepted it (for not all did so) created a tradition that was to endure, the classic tradition of the supreme witness to Christ and of how that holy witness by violent death should be met. In reading the authentic accounts of early martyrdoms one cannot but notice an as it were liturgical quality about them, there is something that recalls the dignity and solemnity of public worship. And that too is not surprising: for Christian martyrdom is essentially a *leitourgia*, a sacred action publicly done for the common good.

That good has several aspects. Part of it is the creation of the tradition itself; but also the edifying, the building together, of that body within which the tradition energizes: that the martyrs' blood is the Church's seed is one of the most oft-quoted of truths. It has been acutely remarked that the martyrs made subsequent saints possible by making subsequent Christianity possible. And the debt to the martyrs, as well as the public nature of holiness, is recognized when we call all other saints 'confessors' (in its non-technical sense the word applies equally to women), for 'confessor' too means 'a witness'.

Saints are as heterogeneous a human category as can be imagined; widely separated, too, in time and place. They came timelessly together in the waters of baptism, they were held together in and by the Body of Christ, his mystical body and his eucharistic body; and this conference is concerned with them in virtue of their common holiness. My business is with some of those martyrs who were their forerunners, whose lives and deaths spoke more effectively than any words to those who came after: 'This is the Way. Walk ye in it.'

This group of early martyrs must be defined. 'Early' I take in the conventional historical sense of those who suffered in the classical Ten Persecutions before the Peace of the Church in the year 313. This is a very large body indeed, and again not homogeneous: they differ endlessly in character, condition, circumstances. Crucial for my purpose, they differ seriously in how much we know about them. Early martyrs, as defined, must bring first to most minds such names as Lawrence, Sebastian, Cecily, Agnes, George, Katharine, Christopher, Barbara, Lucy. Yet with

those, and others hardly less well-known, I am not here concerned. Who then?

Our knowledge of the early martyrs mainly depends on documents—letters, chronicles, ‘acts’ or ‘passions’—which vary greatly in authenticity, scope and historical value. The learned have classified these documents into six categories, according to their worth. The first two of these categories comprise the official reports of the trials of martyrs and the accounts of eye-witnesses and of other trustworthy well-informed contemporaries. Of these precious testimonies there are very few: less than a score have so far been generally recognized. The very circumstances of the composition of these few unquestionably genuine and almost unadulterated narratives give to the martyrs concerned an interest, an appeal, an actuality, a movingness that is irresistible to the reader sixteen hundred or more years afterwards.

‘It is a refreshing experience for any religious-minded person of today to shut his eyes for once to the many complex, and in some degree unpleasant, aspects of religious life and look into the soul of a great man who succeeded in reducing this complexity to one or two engrossing facts or ideas and putting them in the centre of his everyday life.’ Those are the words of the late Dr James Kleist, s.J.,¹ written with reference to St Ignatius of Antioch who, however little is known about his life, has left an intimate picture of his mind and spirit in his letters, six addressed to Christian communities and one to an individual. And what Dr Kleist says about Ignatius can be applied equally well, in their degree and circumstances, to what we are told in the narratives referred to above of the lives, and more particularly of the deaths, of other Christians in the early days, ranging from bishops and a learned apologist in great centres of the Roman empire to slave girls, and a Gothic convert near the lower Danube. The ‘engrossing facts and ideas’ to which Dr Kleist refers are, quite simply, God and Jesus Christ. That indeed is only what would be expected of Christians; what is striking is the simplicity, the firmness, the sobriety with which those facts were clung to, those ideas lived. And should martyrdom be called for, the supreme witness to those facts and ideas, that too was met as being, as it were, ‘all in the day’s work’.

¹ In *The Epistles of St Clement of Rome and St Ignatius of Antioch* (Longmans Green, 1950), Ancient Christian Writers series, No. 1.

If we except St Stephen, the protomartyr, the account of whose passion in the Acts of the Apostles is the prototype of straightforward unadorned martyr narratives, the first in order of time about whom we have this sort of evidence is that same St Ignatius of Antioch, called 'the God-bearer'. About the year 107 the old man was dispatched for execution from what was to become 'the God-beloved city' of Antioch to Rome; he was in charge of a file of soldiers who, he tells us, were like 'ten leopards': he was 'fighting these wild beasts on land and sea, by day and night', and 'the more courteously they are treated the worse they get'. During that journey he wrote his letters, and it is from them, and particularly from the incomparable letter to the Roman Christians written from Smyrna, that Ignatius can be known.

The form of those letters, written from the heart in view of death, have no attraction for the grammarian and the rhetor: for the Christian they are among the most precious testimonies of antiquity. Ignatius was worried lest the brethren at Rome should seek to save his life. 'Do not show me unseasonable kindness, I beseech you', he writes. 'Let wild animals devour me, for so shall I reach God'. And he adds the words that are sung as the communion-verse of the Mass of his feast: 'I am Christ's wheat, and I am to be ground by the teeth of beasts that I may become good bread.'—'I do not give orders to you, as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles, I am a convict. They were free, I am still a slave. But once I have suffered I shall become a freedman of Jesus Christ, made one with him I shall arise free. Just now I learn in my bonds to desire nothing.' Nothing but martyrdom. And that martyrdom came soon, when he was cast to the lions, perhaps in the Colosseum.

The last of the letters of St Ignatius was addressed to Polycarp, the young bishop of Smyrna whom Ignatius had met when he was put aboard ship at that port. Fifty or so years later Polycarp himself was martyred, and an account was sent by the Smyrniot Christians to their brethren at Philomelium in Pisidia. When the police came to arrest him at a farm outside the city, St Polycarp gave them supper, while he stood a long while praying aloud, 'remembering all who had ever come his way, great and small, high and low, and the whole universal Church throughout the world'. He was taken straight to the stadium where, amid a tremendous uproar, the proconsul urged him to 'Swear by the *genius* of Caesar; repent; say "Away with the atheists!"'. And

Polycarp, 'looking on all the crowd of lawless heathen', indicated them with a gesture of his hand and said, 'Away with the atheists!'

He would neither swear by the imperial *genius* nor curse his Master: 'Eighty and six years have I served Christ and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King, who saved me?' He was ready to expound his religion to the proconsul but not to the people, whom 'I do not deem worthy to hear any defence from me'. The mob howled that a lion be loosed on him; but this could not be legally done as the games were officially over. So they clamoured that he be burned, running forward with fuel from workshops and baths. Bound to a stake, St Polycarp prayed in a loud voice, a prayer of praise and thanksgiving, and when he had said Amen to his offering of himself the fire was lit. 'And the fire made a sort of space, like a ship's sail bellying in the wind, surrounding the martyr's body as with a wall, and he in the midst, not like burning flesh but as bread in the baking or gold and silver refined in a furnace. And we caught a sweet fragrance, as it were the breath of incense or other precious spice.'

During the persecution under Marcus Aurelius, and therefore not far removed from the death of St Polycarp, the martyrdom took place in Rome of St Justin, the Palestinian apologist who after his conversion 'preached the word of God, still wearing his philosopher's cloak'. He appears to have been denounced by a Cynic whom he had worsted in public debate, and was brought before the prefect Rusticus with several others.

Justin, who gave his address as 'Martin's house, near Timothy's baths', declared his belief in one eternal God, the Creator, and in God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ; he said that he, Justin, was a man of little worth, but he recognized the testimony of the prophets; and he explained in reply to a question that his fellow believers met where they would and could: 'for our God is not confined by place, but unseen fills heaven and earth, and is worshipped and glorified by the faithful everywhere'.

'To come to the point, then', said the prefect. 'You are a Christian?' 'Yes, I am a Christian,' replied Justin. And so said the others, one of whom was a woman, another a slave in the imperial household, another one of the bystanders, seven in all—'a motley crew', remarks Mgr Duchesne. Asked if he, 'said to be a learned man', thought that were he executed he would go up into heaven, Justin replied, 'I hope if I endure such things to have God's gifts.'

I do not think: I know and know certainly.' And with one voice they refused to sacrifice: 'Do what you will. We are Christians, and we offer no sacrifice to idols.' So Rusticus gave sentence that they be scourged and then beheaded in accordance with the law: which was done, 'and some of the faithful took their bodies by stealth and laid them in a fitting place'.

The year 177 was marked by the passion of numerous martyrs of Lyons and Vienne in Gaul, set out in a letter to the churches of Asia and Phrygia that has been called 'the jewel of the Christian literature of the second century'.² The persecution began with social pressure—exclusion from houses, public baths, markets; then there were casual mobbings and stoning; then the authorities took it up, the public being whipped to hysteria by charges of cannibalism and incest made against the Christians.

The bishop of Lyons, St Pothinus, was over ninety years old, and sick; after being manhandled before the governor he was thrown into prison, where he died two days later. But the individual of whom we are told most is St Blandina, a slave-girl, 'in whom Christ made manifest that things which appear insignificant and uncomely and contemptible are accounted most honourable with God, for their love of him, which is manifested not in outward show but in power'. She was tortured bitterly, but would only say, 'I am a Christian; nothing vile is done amongst us'. Brought into the arena with three others and suspended from a pole with arms outstretched, the wild beasts would not touch her; so she was put aside for another day, when she appeared 'as though she were called to a wedding-feast', with the fifteen-year-old boy Ponticus. 'After the whips, after the beasts, after the fire, she was put at last into a net and thrown to a bull. When she had been tossed about for a long time, no longer knowing what was happening, being upheld by her hope and faith and communing with Christ, she too was offered up, the very heathen declaring that they had never known a woman show such endurance. But even so their rage and savagery against the saints were not appeased.'

St Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, stands out among the martyrs of Africa in the middle of the third century. His first interrogation took place in the private hall of the proconsul Paternus, who

² A translation of their acts by Fr Edmund Hill, O.P., was printed in the December 1956 number of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*.

treated him with some deference: the account gives a strong impression of an interview between two gentlemen, the one carrying out a distasteful duty, the other quietly and courteously firm in his refusal to betray his clergy, without any hint of defiance. Cyprian was banished to Curubis. When he was recalled, his second examination was very short. The proconsul, now Galerius Maximus, asked whether Cyprian had taken it on himself to be the father of these sacrilegious men, and he said he had. 'The most sacred emperors have ordered you to sacrifice.'—'I refuse.'—'Think about it.'—'Do your duty. In so clear a matter there is nothing to think about.' So Galerius Maximus, after consultation with his colleagues, 'very reluctantly', we are told, gave sentence: Thascius Cyprianus was to be put to death by the sword. To which Cyprian replied, 'Thanks be to God'.

A crowd accompanied him to the place of execution; there, having bowed himself in prayer, Cyprian took off his outer clothes and stood in his linen undergarment to await the executioner (to whom he left twenty-five gold pieces). Linen cloths were strewn around him by the brethren,³ while Julian the priest and Julian the subdeacon helped him to blindfold his eyes. 'So suffered the blessed Cyprian; and his body was laid out near by to satisfy the curiosity of the heathen.'

Three among these martyrs were soldiers. St Marinus, stationed at Caesarea in Palestine, was due for promotion, when it was discovered he was a Christian. The local bishop, Theotecnus, led him to the church, and they stood together before the altar. 'Drawing back the soldier's cloak a little, Theotecnus pointed to the sword at his side; at the same time he showed him the book of the gospels, bidding him choose between the two. Without hesitation, Marinus stretched out his right hand and touched the sacred writings.' Taken back to court, 'after showing wonderful zeal, he was led away to death'. St Marcellus, a centurion, suffered at Tangier in 298. At a regimental dinner to honour the emperor's birthday he had refused to take part: he threw his belt down before the standards, exclaiming, 'I serve Jesus Christ, the eternal king. I will serve your emperors no longer. I scorn to worship your gods of wood and stone.' St Maximilian, on the other hand, the son of a veteran in Numidia, refused to serve at all. Like St Martin of Tours and St Victricius of Rouen later, he was what is

³ Presumably to soak up the martyr's blood, and so to be treasured as relics.

nowadays called a conscientious objector; unlike Martin and Victricius, he paid for it with his life.

The narratives abound in lively touches and enlightening details. Polycarp, pushed down from the police-officer's chariot, scraped his shin but concealed his pain. . . . When soldiers came to arrest St Fructuosus, bishop of Tarragona in Spain, he was going to bed; he asked if he might be allowed to put on his shoes. At his interrogation the governor Aemilian asked, 'Are you a bishop?' 'I am', replied Fructuosus. 'You mean you *were*', retorted the governor, and sentenced him to be burnt. Members of Aemilian's household saw a vision of Fructuosus and his deacons going up in glory to Heaven; but when the governor was sent for to see, 'he was not worthy to behold them.' . . . St Papyas was asked if he had children. 'Yes, many, thank God.' And a man in the crowd shouted, 'He means that some of the Christians are his children according to his faith'. His companion, St Carpus, smiled while being bound to the stake. 'I saw the glory of the Lord and was glad', he explained when a bystander commented on his coolness. . . . St Irene, an adolescent girl at Salonika, was accused of hiding Christian writings, the books of the Bible, in her parents' house. She answered her judges with just that mixture of defiance and nervousness that would be shown by any school-girl today. . . . There were attempts by main force to make St Pionius sacrifice in a temple. (He was seized at Smyrna while celebrating the anniversary of St Polycarp's martyrdom); he resisted so violently that it took six men to overpower him. . . . In their speech we can hear the patrician dignity of Cyprian, the preciseness of Justin, the soldierly terseness of Marcellus; above all, perhaps, the three voices in the *Passion of St Perpetua and St Felicity*.⁴

This last holds a position all of its own among the records of the martyrs, nor is that simply due to the interest of later times: for during the fourth century it was publicly read in the churches of North Africa, and was so popular that St Augustine protested that it must not be put on a level with the books of the Bible. There were six martyrs in this group at Carthage on the nones (7th) of March in the year 203. They were Vibia Perpetua, twenty-two years old, a married woman of noble birth with a baby son,

4 Among several English versions of this, may I recommend that by W. H. Shewring (Sheed and Ward, 1931). It includes a Latin text.

Felicity, a slave girl, who was with child, and four men, Revocatus, also a slave, Saturninus, Secundulus and Satorus. They were all catechumens except the last named, who seemingly had been the means of their conversion. Over a third of the narrative was written by St Perpetua herself, a little of it by St Satorus and the remainder by an unknown editor, whom several scholars have identified as Tertullian.

During a period of open arrest the five catechumens received baptism, and a few days later were taken to prison. Perpetua was much troubled for the welfare of her baby, who was with her, and by the entreaties of her aged father; he, poor man, was a heathen and could not at all understand his favourite child's resolution. 'And I grieved for my father's sake, for he alone of all my kin would find no comfort in my suffering'; she felt relieved when he left her and ceased his importunities for a time. Just before her interrogation Perpetua had the first of three dreams or visions: of the dragon-guarded ladder up which she followed Satorus into a garden, where was a white-haired Shepherd milking sheep, around whom stood thousands clad in white; 'And he said to me, 'Welcome, child', and from the curd he had from the milk he gave me a morsel. I received it in my joined hands, and ate; and all that stood by said, "Amen".'

At the trial the procurator appealed to Perpetua in the name of her father and her child, but in vain. Her father was given blows for interrupting ('I grieved for his unhappy old age'), and all were condemned to the beasts. Perpetua's baby was taken from her, and he, 'as God willed, wanted no more to be suckled, nor did I take fever, that I might not be troubled by anxiety for the baby or by pain in my breasts'.

A few days later she dreamed of her seven-year-old brother Dinocrates, who had died of a horrible disease. He looked feverish, thirsty and miserable, and was trying to drink from a fountain that was too high for him to reach. So she set herself to pray for him; and she again saw Dinocrates, now drinking the waters of the fountain and playing happily. On the day before her passion Perpetua had another vision. She seemed to be in the arena, confronted by an ugly Egyptian; and a Man of huge stature, gloriously clothed, told her she must fight with the Egyptian, and if she triumphed she would receive the branch that he carried, on which were golden apples. Perpetua was stripped and rubbed

down with oil by attendants, and, she says, 'I became a man'. And she fought with the Egyptian and overcame him; the description of the contest is most lively. She received the branch, and the bearer of it kissed her, saying, 'Peace be with you, daughter'. 'And I awoke, understanding that I should not fight with beasts but with the Devil. But I knew that victory was mine.'

Saturus too had a vision. With Perpetua he was carried by angels to heaven, a garden full of trees 'whose leaves sang without ceasing', and they were invited to 'go in and greet the Lord'. As they entered, voices as one voice were singing 'Holy, holy, holy'; and in the midst sat One like unto a man, with snow-white hair but youthful countenance, surrounded by elders. 'The four angels lifted us up; and we kissed him, and he stroked our faces with his hand (*cf.* Apoc. vii, 17). And the elders said, "Stand up". And we stood up, and gave one another the kiss of peace. Then said the elders to us, "Go and play". And I said to Perpetua, "You have what you desired". She said to me, "God be thanked that I, who was merry in the flesh, am still merrier now". Surely those are the very accents of Thomas More thirteen hundred years later.

Felicity meanwhile was troubled lest her pregnancy should delay her martyrdom till after the others (for it was unlawful to execute a woman who was with child). She was eight months gone, and her fellows prayed together on her behalf. Two days before the games she gave birth to a girl, who was straightway adopted by one of the faithful. The labour was difficult, and a warder said to her, 'You are suffering now: what about when you are thrown to the beasts?' 'Now I suffer what I suffer', Felicity replied, 'but then Another will be in me who will suffer for me, because I am to suffer for him.' On their last night the condemned celebrated a love-feast, and many came out of curiosity to watch them. Saturus told these sightseers to be about their business: 'Won't you see enough of us tomorrow?' They went away astonished; and some believed.

The contest of these martyrs took place at the games held in honour of the festival of Geta Caesar. As they entered the arena, 'with gay and gallant looks', the three men (Secundulus had died in prison) threatened the onlookers with God's judgment, even the president where he sat in state. Felicity came rejoicing,

'from blood to blood, from the midwife to the gladiator, to be washed after childbirth in a second baptism'. Last of all Perpetua, 'true bride of Christ and darling of God, her piercing look abashing all eyes . . . singing victoriously'. These Christians were always singing!

Saturninus and Revocatus were exposed to a leopard and then to a bear. Saturus was twice put back unhurt, and then was mauled by the bite of a leopard. Dipping a ring in his blood he gave it to a soldier, Pudens, saying, 'Good-bye! Remember the faith and me. And let not these things disturb but strengthen you' (Pudens was afterwards himself a martyr). And so Saturus died. But the two women, against all custom and in mockery of their sex, were thrown to a savage cow, which tossed them both. Perpetua sat up, drew her torn tunic about her, and pinned up her hair, 'for it was not seemly that a martyr should suffer with hair dishevelled, lest she should seem to mourn in her glory'. Then she helped Felicity to her feet, and they were put back. Perpetua—'so lost was she in the Spirit and in ecstasy'—asked when they were to be thrown to the cow, and would hardly believe it had already happened. She turned to her brother and another catechumen: 'Stand fast in faith', she said, 'and love one another. And do not let our sufferings be a stumbling-block to you.'

They kissed one another, 'that they might fulfil their martyrdom with the rite of peace', and moved to a place where all might see the final sword-stroke. Saturninus and Revocatus and Felicity died without sound or stir. But Perpetua's executioner was a novice and failed to kill her at the first blow, so that she shrieked with pain: then she herself guided the gladiator's wavering hand to her throat. 'Perhaps', says the *passio*, 'so great a woman, feared by the unclean spirit, could not have been slain unless she so willed it.'

These few notes do but scant justice to the theme; but they are enough to show these martyrs as men and women, not as puppets; that their records are of what happened, uncontaminated by folklore and fairy-tales. There is none of the accumulation of monstrous torments, of pointless and often fantastic marvels, with which the appeal of simple stories was afterwards heightened or lack of information supplied. The writers were not yet didactic, composing manifestos for, as an instance, the dignity of virginity;

or expanding proconsular interrogations into theological arguments and apologies. (In a writing-up of the sober account of St Procopius that is given by Eusebius, the martyr is made to refer to Hermes Trismegistus, Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Galen and Scamandrus in support of the oneness of God; what the contemporary Eusebius says he did was to accommodate one line from the *Iliad*.) Here are plain men and women, from all states of life, reminding us, *mutatis mutandis*, of none so much as some of the English martyrs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

And for what did they suffer? Mr Christopher Dawson rightly says, 'The Roman empire was antichristian not so much because of its official worship of Jupiter and Mars and the rest, but because it made its own power and greatness the supreme law and the only measure of its social action'. The record is plain. 'Have you heard what the emperors have ordered?'—'Swear by Caesar's *genius*.'—'Obey the gods, and submit to the princes.' Christians were esteemed sacrilegious, impious, atheists, because they would not thus sacrifice or swear. They were looked on as haters of the human race because, in what touched religion, and there only, they dissociated themselves from the solidarity of the Roman empire. It was, in modern terms, an attempt by the state, the civil power, to coerce the conscience of its citizens. So it has been, many times and in many places, throughout the ages, from that day to this. And the Christian answer has likewise been the same: from the Apostles' 'We ought to obey God rather than men', through More's 'The king's good servant, but God's first', down to our own times. 'Give honour to Caesar as unto Caesar, but fear to God', said St Donata before the proconsul at Scillium. 'I am a Christian; I worship Christ', declared St Carpus at Pergamos. 'So be assured, O proconsul, that I do *not* sacrifice to these counterfeits.' By such words they convicted themselves. As Tertullian says, 'The only thing needed to satisfy the general hatred is, not the investigation of a charge, but the confession of the Name'.

Near the beginning of these pages I quoted Dr Kleist's observation about the freedom from religious complexity shown in the letters of St Ignatius of Antioch. That concentration runs through all these genuine martyr narratives: on God, Jesus Christ, the gathering of the brethren in the Church, indwelt, corporately and individually, by the Holy Spirit. The thought and life of

these Christians is permeated by the Sacred Scriptures: in thirteen of these narratives there are over two hundred and fifty separate quotations from or allusions to the text of the Bible, mostly of course the New Testament. There is no 'multiplicity', no complication, no hint of dissipation of spiritual energy: as Dr Kleist says of St Ignatius, they are concentrated on that 'upholding of your traditions just as I have handed them on to you' for which St Paul praised the Corinthians. Even for those who might desire it, the recovery of such primitive simplicity is doubtless impossible.

Less agreeable is the element of defiance and threats of divine vengeance on their persecutors that appears in some of the narratives. You can find it in the Perpetua *passio*, or in the 'acts' of James and Marianus, or again when St Pionius fights with his captors. In his *Androcles and the Lion*, George Bernard Shaw was nearer the truth than his Christian critics realized.

But, connected with this 'unsophisticated' atmosphere, there is something which is perhaps a practical and insistent message for Christians today, who also feel that upon them 'the ends of the world are come'. Again Dr Kleist refers to it. It is the note of triumph, of victory, among these early Christians; they were fully conscious of being 'a chosen race, a kingly priesthood, a consecrated nation', a society of which, in the words of St Augustine, 'the king is Truth, the law is Love and the duration is Eternity'. Their Christianity is 'indubitably confident and absolutely certain. . . . Consciousness of victory animated them all. . . . Blandina no less than Tertullian or Lactantius.' Was there, on the human level, any more ground for triumph among the Christians of the two and a half centuries from Nero to Diocletian than there is today? Or less? The victorious aspect of martyrdom is decisive: but *they* saw in it simply a special participation in the victory of Christ. It was in that they triumphed, martyrs or not. Fallen mankind was redeemed on Calvary; and on the third day redeemed mankind triumphed with the Saviour. It is that that the Church re-lives on every Lord's Day, on every day. 'Christ conquers, Christ reigns, Christ rules'; every Christian shares his triumph, and 'neither death nor life, nor angels or principalities or powers, neither what is present nor what is to come, no force whatever' can take it away from us.

But love and reverence for these early martyrs must not with-

draw attention from those of the ages that followed, and those of our own age. The opening passage of the *Passion of St Perpetua and St Felicity* would seem to be relevant: 'If ancient examples of faith, which both witness to the grace of God and strengthen man, were therefore set out in writing that, by their reading and recalling of the past, God might be glorified and man strengthened, should not new examples which serve these ends also be set forth? For these too will some day be old and needful for those who come after us. . . .' *In pace illi, nos in spe.*



SOME PROBLEMS OF A HAGIOGRAPHER

LANCELOT C. SHEPPARD

LEGENDS are part of great events and if they help to keep alive the memory of gallant self-sacrifice they serve their purpose.' That is a quotation from Walter Lord's book *A Night to Remember* which describes the sinking of the *Titanic* when it struck an iceberg in 1912. The particular legend here referred to is that of the singing of 'Nearer, my God, to thee' as the ship went down. I have chosen it as an example with which to begin this paper because it is a legend that I have been acquainted with personally and can vouch for as being in existence within four years of the event that it concerns; it was, in fact, current very soon after the ship went down. It was totally untrue. If you examine this particular legend you will find that it contains all the elements of those popular legends connected with the saints; including the fact of being untrue. There you have an example of the sort of problem confronting the writer of the lives of the saints. For that is what hagiography is: the biography of the saints, and thus in addition to the problems that he has to tackle in common with all biographers the hagiographer has special ones of his own.

It has often been pointed out that the history of the world is made up of the biographies of those who have lived in it. Genesis you will remember does not take long before it gets into its