

BLACKFRIARS

SCHOOLS OF HOLINESS

II

SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES

THE life of St. Francis de Sales—1567-1622, still within the afterglow (or the penumbra) of the Renaissance—covered a very remarkable period in the Church's history. Luther had been dead twenty-one years and the Counter-Reformation had gathered great strength in the interval, to which St. Francis himself later contributed in no small measure by his amazingly successful missionary excursions into the Savoyan province of Le Chablais. The Council of Trent, which embodied the true principles of reform within the Church, had held its final session four years before he was born, and these principles had been, and were still being, practically exhibited and illustrated by the astonishing galaxy of saints that adorned this new era of her history. The lifetime of St. Francis de Sales was contemporaneous with, or at least overlapped at one end or the other, that of nearly a score of the most illustrious figures in the annals of sanctity. St. Pius V, the Dominican Pope, from whose white habit the now established dress of the Supreme Pontiff derives, reigned over the Church for the first five years of St. Francis's life. St. Charles Borromeo, St. Philip Neri, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis Borgia were still living during his early youth, as also were the boy saints, Stanislas, Aloysius, and (a little later) John Berchman. Other contemporaries were St. Vincent de Paul, the three Saints Peter (aptly symbolic name for the day!), Canisius, Claver, and Fourier, St. Jane Frances de Chantal, St. John Francis Regis, and St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi.

Other contemporaries, interesting from a rather different point of view, were Queen Elizabeth of England, and that hardly less enigmatic personage, Henry IV of France. St. Francis was a child of four when the Turks were overthrown at Lepanto, and he had just come of age when the Invincible Armada sailed out to defeat and destruction,

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His day was like a throw-back to the Apostolic Age, a second visible coming of the Holy Ghost. There can be little doubt that this epoch marked a veritably new date in the practice, as distinguished from the doctrine, of the Church—importing something of a condescension to a sanctified humanism, a ‘vulgarization’ (the word is not intended to carry the slightest reproach) for the benefit of the ordinary average Catholic, of a thing hitherto considered as more or less esoteric and altogether exceptional. You might call it ‘Heaven opened to Christians’—sanctity made (not easy, indeed, but) practicable for all. **O**f this Gospel, St. Francis was the Apostle. Pre-eminently he showed the way to a re-adjustment of worldly circumstances with spiritual demands. His doctrine amounted to a synthesis of the sometimes apparently contradictory postulates of the life of perfection, showing that these are reconcilable, and should be reconciled, in any state of life, however far it might superficially seem to diverge from the accepted canons of the science. **H**e said of himself that he was not ‘a man of extremes’: no, but he envisaged nothing less than the best, though it might seem to the casual student of his writings and direction that he was sometimes content with the second-best. No error concerning him could be more fundamental than this. All his aim was to extract the best obtainable (obviously not always the best imaginable) from his penitents. He may, as a shrewd analyst of saintly psychology has hinted, have now and then put just a little too much honey on the lip of the cup that he presented to them: but he was one of those miraculous geniuses who see centuries ahead of their own time, and experience has proved that the guidance of St. Francis de Sales, devised for the vacillating and bewildered souls of his day, is quite peculiarly adapted to the needs of souls certainly not less bewildered and very much more vacillating, who in our own day have to grapple with problems so different from theirs.

He has been called the chief of ‘modern’ saints. This means, one supposes, that his type of sanctity was one with which the modern mind, no longer torn between the early

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violent recoil from pagan mentality and the late partial relapse into that mentality brought about by the Renaissance, finds itself in sympathy, for the outstanding characteristic of his school of holiness was *balance*, in which are involved breadth and moderation and tranquillity. His was the sort of sanctity that attracts admiration but does not frighten, and that seems (surprisingly) to *fit in* with the average human life instead of clashing with it. The average man can see himself in that galley instead of having to regard it as a station demanding a special physical and spiritual constitution, almost a special order of being. He has been accustomed to think of the saints as persons so peculiarly privileged, so aided and protected, so unlike himself in every particular, that by no stretch of his imagination can he fancy them as objects for his practical imitation. In addition, he has come to think that a saint who is not a religious, or at least a priest, is something anomalous. The net result of prepossessions such as these has been to remove sanctity to an almost inaccessible region, far over the horizon of the average Christian, and to establish the belief that it *must* be a hard, bleak, dreary path that leads to it, for is it not true that the saint must never take pleasure in anything for its own sake: that he must find no rest in any creature. nor seek it: that he must disown all credit for the good that he does, nor even admit to himself that he has done any good: that the world must be his bitter and unrelenting enemy wherein he may find no joy nor satisfaction: that the so-called natural affections must be sterilized into complete impersonality, his native faculties denied the opportunity of exercise, his body treated as a thing inherently bad and corruptive?

Persons who think like this do not pause to ask themselves whether, indeed, such a philosophy of life could stand the test of practice for a week. One supposes, justifiably perhaps, that the question of practice does not trouble them. But even as a matter of pure speculation one wonders how they can square such a theory with the unquestionable fact that Christ has laid the achievement of holiness upon us as an *obligation*: for it is a Command-

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ment, according to Him, that we should love God with the whole of ourselves—mind, heart, soul and strength—and holiness, to put it in a phrase, *is* no other thing than the love of God. If they are right, then God has so ordered our life that the one thing that we are here to do with it is also the very hardest of all the things that we could do with it—so hard, indeed, that the overwhelming majority of us simply cannot do it.

No doubt it is true that things have been said about the saints, and perhaps even by the saints, which lend a very colourable authority to such views. It is indeed the sin of one school of hagiographers that they have been so constantly at pains to make the lives of the saints seem as extraordinary and as unusual and difficult as they could—*ipsi viderint!* And as regards the saints themselves, it is one thing to live a heroic life and quite another order of things to be able to give an account of its principles. If they were not human they were not saints, and if they were human they were liable to inequality in the power of expression as other human beings are, and were as truly the subjects of differentiation by character, sex, nationality, upbringing, age, social condition, intellectual power and other like circumstances as anyone else. Canonization affords **us** a guarantee of their doctrinal and moral orthodoxy, but not at all **of** their analytical or expository ability. We should not pay an equal attention to the ascetical teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas and of Brother Giles. The **Curé d'Ars** had certain rigorist, not to say Jansenist-like, principles of direction which few would approve to-day. St. Bernard, on his deathbed, asked pardon of his body for his over-harsh treatment of it.

The life and teaching of St. Francis de Sales came as *a* ray of new light upon the problem. He used to say that the saints are indeed the salt of the earth, but that for that very reason they must be *in* the earth—their life must be capable of being lived among the surroundings and accidents in which the lives of ordinary men are lived—or what profits their savour? For goodness, he insisted, does not do violence to our nature: it does not restrict but expands it:

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grace, falling upon it, illumines it and brings out its beauty as the light of the sun brings out the beauty of a stained-glass window. And this illumination is an all-round effect: no **more** than do the rays of the sun in the example which he gives, does it select some details and leave others unlit.

It is true that in ordinary material (or at least non-spiritual) affairs we can usually attain **to** excellence in any one direction only at the cost of sacrificing other possibilities of achievement; but it is characteristic of the life of the soul that its perfection has a use for, demands the exercise of, *all* its powers, as indeed we should expect, seeing that they all have as their proper end and significance nothing else than the perfect service **of** God in which alone consists our own perfection. The only narrowness, therefore, that he would admit is such as is inseparable from the qualities of firmness, of determination not to compromise, **of** exclusiveness of aim, which do sometimes involve the refusal or neglect of opportunity: for the use of some of the 'creatures' which God has given us **for** our sanctification is that we should *not* use them—certain common instincts, for instance, otherwise legitimate—which may be lawful and helpful for one and harmful for another, or right and good under one set of circumstances but bad under another.

He would not, however, have anyone think that holiness is a cheap thing: quite otherwise, he once said that sanctity was the greatest of all miracles. But one feels that he had then in his mind the promise of Our Lord that to those who have faith—the *real* thing, such as He demanded so rigorously of His Apostles, were it only as small as a mustard-seed, a pin-point—greater miracles of grace than those symbolic material ones which had so astonished them, would be commonplaces: the most mountainous obstacles would be removed and cast into the sea. But he strenuously combated, as a pernicious falsehood, the common persuasion that sanctity is **so** difficult a thing as to be practically out of the reach of the ordinary Christian, and he insisted that there are no circumstances of human life which need be inimical to its attainment.

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For this he was, even in his lifetime, abused and derided. Mr. Worldlyman likes to think that Christian Perfection is an anomalous thing: he would be very uncomfortable if he believed otherwise. The Jansenists were of that cast of thought, and it pleased them to make the way, not of the transgressor alone, but of the aspirant no less, a hard one. So that when, thirty-nine years after his death, the Bishop of Geneva was beatified, pious people were seriously scandalized: and still more so when, after four more years, he became St. Francis de Sales. He had made it all too easy, they said: almost as if they grudged anyone becoming a saint. He had made holiness—the Love of God, mind you!—*too* easy. It ought to be difficult, then, an uncommon thing, a thing against nature? A contemporary author thought that he had said something very biting when he called the path to holiness, as traced by the Saint, ‘a pleasant road.’ And all that St. Francis had said (or done) was to show that it is not strange to love God: that **God** has not made it frantically difficult to do so: that He has not given us one kind of nature and then made demands upon us which could only be met if we had a totally different one. He had only said that God has made us for Himself, so that we shall be forever restless until we rest in Him, and that we *can* rest in Him now, if we will, and yet be ourselves.

His method of direction was gentle, as was Christ’s: but nevertheless, like Him, he made uncompromising demands upon those who submitted to it. We are to learn of Christ meekness, kindness, and humility of heart: but also, that we are unfit to be His disciples if we do not hate our life, carry **our** cross, forsake all. Gentleness in this matter is by no means the same thing as softness or weakness: it allows for sensuality and frivolity, but it does not condone them, it aims to win rather than to terrify people out of them. If St. Francis de Sales permitted to some of his penitents interests and amusements which another in his place might have condemned as positively incompatible with a devout life, it was not because he imagined that these things were going to sanctify them, nor because he thought them the

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best things for them to do, but because he knew very well that few persons are ready for a sudden 'conversion of manners' if that is to be permanent, and that if their desire of perfection, however small at the moment, was genuine, these things would very soon become distasteful and be abandoned without any further urging from him. For above all he required genuineness and sincerity, and where he saw that these were lacking he limited any further dealing with such a soul (if he could not disembarass himself of the charge altogether) to preserving it at least from total loss. But where he discerned the marks of a true vocation to perfection, he became an exacting guide. He taught incessant watchfulness over one's faults and evil tendencies, even the smallest, and unremitting effort to practise the Christian virtues in a high degree. But though he would never minimize or economize in this matter, neither did he favour violence over it. Violence too often defeats itself, since it bears in itself the seeds of impermanence : and he forever preached tranquillity, patience with self, cheerfulness, even in the midst of the most resolute struggle. All was to be subordinated to *fidelity*. But fidelity is nothing if it costs nothing, and it would cost nothing if it did not imply the likelihood of many revulsions of feeling, many failures and backslidings, many doubts and fears and defeats. Holiness, he insisted again and again, is a matter of the will: and it is consummated not necessarily in achievement but essentially in perseverance. And it is a matter of love, not of fear. It comes, normally, little by little as real love comes, invading the soul not (except in certain very special cases) as by some sudden and tremendous illumination, but gradually, peacefully, though irresistibly, as daylight steals into the sky at dawn.,

Holiness, in his conception of it, should be an all-round quality without abruptness or eccentricity : it should not involve the suppression in us of anything that is not in itself bad, for the likeness to God (we call it the 'approach' to God) which is its essence must be incomplete in the proportion that it does not extend to the whole of us. So we must be truthful to ourselves about ourselves, and we shall

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lose as much by not seeing the good that really is in us as by fancying that we see good that is not there at all. It is as right and due that we should thank **God** for the virtue that His grace has established in us as that we should ask His forgiveness for our sinfulness that hinders His grace. It is no derogation from the truth of this statement to recognize that, in point of fact, the nearer we draw to God the less will we think of either, for this indicates no more than that there is growing within us the realization that all our goodness is His and that our very wretchedness makes us the fitter objects of His mercy and power.

St. Francis de Sales did not confuse the Counsels with the Precepts: he was mindful of Our Lord's words to the young Ruler, 'If thou *wilt* be perfect.' But he let it be known that his manner of direction would be of little service to one who having faced the issue should voluntarily choose the lower level.

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SOCIAL UNREST IN SPAIN

FEW, least of all the Catholic, will deny that the present social system with its manifest injustice cries out urgently for radical reforms, and it is to this task that some of the best Catholic minds in Spain are now applying themselves. The main problem is to win back the masses to the Church and to convince them that a true remedy for the social ills that afflict society is to be found in the papal encyclicals, and there alone. That the task is a difficult one will be realized from an analysis of Spain's political panorama as it affects the proletariat. At the present time liberalism, democracy, and 'reformist' socialism are engaged in a life and death struggle for survival. A clear-cut alignment of **social** forces is taking place through the gradual elimination of all intermediary or 'compromise' parties. The issue daily narrows itself down to the choice between 'in-