

Do We Need Any More Saints ?

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In the true sense of the word of course there can never be enough saints. Luther, I have heard, said that the only thing that matters is to be a saint. Simone Weil is even more uncompromising: "it seems to me that saintliness is, if I dare say so, the minimum for a Christian" (*Seventy Letters*, ed. Rees, 1965, p. 175). It is simply a linguistic oddity that English and German among others have tended to separate the word 'saint' or its equivalent from 'holy', whereas the Romance languages keep one word to describe the holy person and to mark out those whose saintliness the Church has formally recognised. In England the word may even take on a dismissive air; one hears from time to time the quite unashamed remark, "I don't pretend to be a saint", as if unsaintliness were a perfectly reasonable and acceptable state of mind, which we can in any case do nothing about, a condition perhaps that one has been born with, as who should say, "I don't pretend to be very clever". A booklet published by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul innocently answers the question whether its members are "near-saints": "Certainly not, God knows, they are ordinary Catholics, real men who (let it be said with the utmost humility) are *trying* to do God's will". Saints are of course extraordinary—that is why we feel we need a special word for them; and I suggest that part of their difference is in their *greater* human reality, or rather that they are more fully human (whole) by being holy. This modest-seeming admission, then, is not simply slacker in demand, it is slacker in logic than what Simone Weil wants: she goes on to say that saintliness

"is to the Christian what financial probity is to the merchant, or courage to the soldier, or objectivity to the scientist. The virtue specific to the Christian is called sanctity. Or if not, what is its name? But by a conspiracy as old as Christianity itself, and stronger with each century, this truth has been concealed, along with several others equally uncomfortable. There exist in fact dishonest merchants, cowardly soldiers, etc. and also people who have chosen to love Christ but who are infinitely below the level of sanctity. Of course I am one of them..."

This note is not intended to explore the linguistic history of the word; but we need to remember that saintliness—being a saint—is *always* a matter of goodness, holiness. In a recent article in *The Month*, M. J. Walsh remarks that “it is time to ask again what saints are for”. Fr. Walsh is interested in relating this question to the procedures which lead to canonisation; but, though it is very important to ask it, we should recognise what a strange question it is. The strangeness is immediately evident if we make a slight shift and ask what good men are for. Of course that is not Fr. Walsh’s question, nor is it the one I have put at the head of these remarks; but the shift is only slight, and there is an essential connexion between them which is obscured by the peculiar selectivity of the Church’s calendar.

The feast of All Saints is the Church’s formal acknowledgement of its ignorance of all those dead whose holiness is known to God alone, and the tribute we pay is not unlike that to the unknown soldier. That so much of the world’s saintliness should pass unknown is of the nature of the case: virtue is only its own advertisement by being known, not by publishing the knowledge. Yet it is much more than that, and in consequence often much less. If one thinks back over the past few decades, what names among those in the public view spring to mind for their saintliness? John XXIII of course. And then my list would pass immediately to Simone Weil and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King. If, as Donald Attwater wrote in the introduction to his *Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, a saint is canonized “because his personal daily life was lived, not merely well, but at an heroic level of Christian faithfulness and integrity”, their saintliness shines out like so many good deeds in a naughty world. Yet we know that they will never be canonized—the one because, intensely devoted to Christ as she was, certain irreducible philosophical difficulties concerning “not the mysteries themselves but the accretions of definition with which the Church has seen fit to clothe them in the course of centuries” kept her back from being baptized; the others because, though politeness or queasiness now forbids the name of heresy, they were among our “separated brethren”. Perhaps we should not expect the Church to go out of its way to venerate those who were at least in some measure its opponents or insisted on their differences. Yet if one wants to point to someone who surrendered himself wholly to the Christ living in him, and that to the point of martyrdom, who in our century could be preferred before Bonhoeffer?

What, though, does it matter that these—among countless others—should escape canonization? (If it were conceivable, they might themselves think it an impertinence.) They will not be forgotten any more than Pope John will be. On the other hand how many of the thousands who are in the calendar are even a name to

most of us? Some of the early saints, as we now know, achieved their cultus very irregularly; but since 1634 when the whole procedure of canonization was formalized, how many saints do we remember because they have been canonized? An impossible question to answer, though a glance at the Dictionary will show how many are popularly unknown *despite* it. Is even one so recent as Pius X remembered for the humble poverty of his life rather than for his controversial ecclesiastical politics?

If saints are to be venerated, then from our point of view, it is because we need the spur of the example of excellence, and especially of an excellence in which we can recognise the active presence of God's grace. And it is worth remembering that the move towards a canonization has very often been started and maintained by popular enthusiasm: it is fitting that popular recognition of holiness should have its formal acknowledgement. It was rumoured during Vatican II that Pope John would be canonized there and then, if not exactly by popular acclaim, at least by that of the Council Fathers. Such things cannot happen now, even though here was a man whose goodness touched the 20th-century world as perhaps no other's has. Doubtless a formal process is needed to prevent the superstitious reverence of those who do not deserve it (is St. Canute the Fourth still with us?) or, in extreme cases, may not even exist. Yet the very fact that public acclaim may compel the recognition it precedes may make of that recognition little more than a formality—except of course that the process is normally so slow that the public memory dies. The Church has now given its blessing to a cultus of John Ogilvie, and for a time his name will be widely known; but his heroism and martyrdom were known before—indeed, if they had not been, the miraculous cure which is held to have been the convincing proof of his acceptance would likewise have been unrecognized because unsought: only in the context of an existing attitude of reverence could anyone have the confidence to invoke his aid.

The old contradiction in the Church's attitude to its as yet unacknowledged saints seems to me marked in the case of Frédéric Ozanam. Every conference meeting of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul includes prayers for the beatification of the Society's founder: the name of Ozanam is not widely known outside the Society and should be; yet all of its members know of him and of his saintliness; they above all need no confirmation of his example. So what exactly is being sought in this prayer? Not, plainly, Ozanam's salvation, his reception into Heaven, which must be a condition—mustn't it?—of his veneration by the Church on earth, and which no-one making the prayer will venture to question; it is rather the public recognition of this, the official spreading of his name abroad. That doubtless is a very worthy cause; but

beatification in this sense is a human, not a divine, action. Strangely the Society does not even include Ozanam's name among those whose intercessory prayers it seeks; the Blessed Contardo Ferrini is there because he, alone so far among brothers of the Society, has been beatified. But we do not hesitate to ask for the prayers of others living and even to offer our own—an immodest offering indeed if it were not, as all prayer, a searching for grace. Such an exclusion, which I single out simply because I happen to have come across it, seems typical of the nervous timidity which still affects the Church in so many of its formal associations. For the Society of St. Vincent de Paul cannot possibly doubt Ozanam's personal holiness; and the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avail-eth much.

The very stateliness, the slow deliberateness of the Church's process is always a check on enthusiasm, well-founded or not. But it not only runs the risk, as Robert Nowell has recently written, of dooming the saint to a place in the history books rather than in the imagination of everyday life; it imposes a formality which distances and cramps the rejuvenating influence which the true heartfelt knowledge of a good man's life always is. The person who through his life inspires one to heroism or self-sacrifice beyond one's normal self is worth all the acts of canonization that have ever been.

Furthermore, since the Reformation any act of canonization has been, in one aspect, sectional and probably, to some eyes, polemical. That is not in itself a good reason to suspend the practice. (It is interesting and noteworthy that the Anglican Church, which has retained and often encouraged veneration of the saints in the ancient calendar, has never added to it, though this cannot be from want of saintliness. The case of Charles I is suggestive of the Church of England's uncertainty: there are a handful of churches dedicated to 'King Charles the Martyr', but he has never been called St. Charles. Of course not all martyrs are saints.) But any action which *seems* to foster division needs the deepest of thought and the closest of scrutiny. It is not all that long ago that such a declaration as that which inaugurated the formal canonization of the 16th-century English martyrs would have been seen by many as a provocative piece of papal aggression—and might even, put in different terms, have been intended as such. No doubt to a few people it still *was* that at the time of the canonization; but tempers have cooled in four centuries, and the notable breadth and generosity of spirit shown at the time by Anglicans against whom earlier the celebration of Catholic martyrs might have seemed to be directed, ensured not only a welcome but the understanding that the saintly heroism of these men was something to which all people were in debt. So may it be with John Ogilvie. Even so, one would like to feel more confidence that sympathy would be

shown in the other direction. It is alas too much to hope that the Roman Church might itself encourage more than decent respect for those (not all of them fanatics or crazy or malicious or even hard) who have been martyred by, or at the instance of, the officials of the Church; but we might ask for a little less reticence in encouraging the reverent study of the lives of such 'non-Catholic' saints as the three (out of so many) whom I have mentioned by name.

Finally one word, and one only, on the vexatious question of miracles, which does unfortunately give rise, even among the well-intentioned and generous, to scepticism, and among others to scoffing. The vast majority of us are in no position to comment on the evidence for such a particular miracle of healing, say, as has for centuries played, we understand, so critical a part in establishing a saint's credentials. But that kind of miracle is as nothing (even though it is what Christ left as part of His promise to believers) compared with the miracle of the saint's life—the devoted single-minded heroism impossible without the miracle of God's grace. That life, by contrast, is something we can all see, and it is what above all matters.

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