



Writing about the Saints

by

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Too many authors of the last centuries wrote lives of the saints exclusively for our "edification," with little eye for history and much for legend. The saint's defects were explained away or even passed over in silence, and the tendency was to provide the reader with a short treatise on the spiritual life in two parts, one on the saint's life and the other on his or her virtues.

This remains true of many of the more recent biographies, a fact which accounts for the low opinion in which "hagiography" is commonly held. There are, however, several admirable biographies of

the saints which serve to correct this opinion. It is noteworthy that they employ the scientific criteria of *history* and *psychology*, possess the qualities of *good writing*; and, above all, are based on *sound theological principles*.

HISTORY

Sound hagiography, whose chief aim is to describe – for the spiritual benefit of the reader – the intimate and remarkable dialogue which God establishes and develops within a man's soul, requires first and foremost an objective statement of

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the fact. The writer must follow all the scientific principles of the historian. He must study the sources, collate them, evaluate them, and then, on the basis of his investigations, demonstrate the organic development of the saint's life and writings against the contemporary background of time and place. It is obvious that the chief source will be the people who knew the particular saint, his own writings and letters, his behaviour and judgment in concrete situations. It is perhaps not well-known that much of this truly essential research material is to be found in the so-called *Positiones*, which must be prepared whenever a Cause of beatification or canonization is examined by the S. Congregation of Rites. In these *Positiones*, the life and holiness of the saint is examined according to the most rigorous historical, theological and ascetical standards. And it is regrettable that they often remain unconsulted. If this is a loss for ascetical studies it is equally so for hagiography.

The most important principle in hagiography, as in all historical work, is neither to suppress nor to modify, neither to distort nor to state according to preconceived notions, the objective fact. On the same count, there must be no stressing of some events at the expense of others without a serious and objective reason for so doing, particularly in regard to those events which are sensational in character, whilst the humdrum and hidden life is left in the shade. Often enough the true character of a man is more securely found in the ordinary, rather than in the extraordinary.

How do modern biographies of the saints stand in regard to historical criteria? In theory, these criteria are generally accepted. In practice, there are indeed many

erudite modern works based on sound historical criticism. e.g. G. Bardy on *St. Augustine*, J. Brodrick on *St. Peter Canisius* and *St. Robert Bellarmine*, Mgr. F. Trochu on *St. John Vianney*, and a number of others. At the same time many of the saints' biographers offend against these principles in one way or another. One class of such writing requires special comment: lives of saints presented in the form of a novel. These fall into two categories. In the first, the saints and their actions are creations of the writer's fantasy in which incidents are taken from the lives of one or more historical saints. The whole is then placed in its historical context; and the author seems to aim at describing not *the saint* but *a saint of the period*. *Quo Vadis* and *Fabiola* belong to this category. In the second, the facts are accurately recorded, but the biographer uses a greater or lesser degree of literary licence in interpreting the facts. F. Werfel's *Song of Bernadette* is an example of this type of writing, which has its counterpart on an ever-widening scale in the world of the cinema.

There is no doubt that the majority of writers of these "novelized" biographies have every intention of glorifying the particular saint, and have succeeded in arousing genuine interest in religious matters and in sanctity, even amongst people who are a long way from the faith. But it must be admitted that for true veneration of the saints there is no need to have recourse to such literary devices. The objective, historical account of what has taken place between God and the soul is more eloquent than any literary creation. Besides, the less well-informed reader will be unable to distinguish truth from fiction; whilst the more learned will find themselves con-

stantly asking the question: "Is this part of the story *true*, or is it a product of the author's fancy?" Moreover, such works always tend to stress the sensational and the marvellous at the expense of the purely human element; and sound hagiography cannot survive this treatment.

Another modern trend is the lavish use of photography as supplementary evidence. This can make a notable contribution to hagiography. The well-known volume by W. Schamoni on the true features of the saints and the study of St. Pius X by L. von Matt and N. Vian, which was the first of a series of similar works on other saints, are admirable examples of the method.

PSYCHOLOGY

On the other hand, good hagiography – just as good historiography – is much more than a mere description of historical events. The reader has a right to expect the sort of interpretation which, whilst remaining within the ambit of historical fact, will lead him to discover the main-spring of the saint's life and actions. In this context, the question arises whether we should use modern psychological methods for this purpose: graphology, analysis of external physical characteristics, psychoanalyses carried out in the lifetime of the saint, or analogous investigations made after death. Should we try to apply other scientific tests to discover, for example, the temperamental dispositions of the saints and, in some cases, to judge whether there were any traces of a neurasthenic or hysteric character?

The principle on which our answer must rest would seem to be:

No truly scientific method of increasing our knowledge of the particular saint should be rejected *a priori*; far from rejecting such methods as blasphemous or undignified, we must be ready to use all that modern science can offer; truth can only serve to augment God's glory and that of His saints.

At the same time since we are dealing with historical truth which is divine as well as human, our attitude must be one of the greatest reverence. We must stress with equal firmness that there is no place here for the amateur. Experimental psychology is still in its infancy; and its most competent and experienced practitioners are the first to insist on the caution required for the investigation of so delicate a subject as the human personality, particularly when the person under investigation is already dead, and still more so when he or she lived in the distant past. Scientific certitude in this field is rarely achieved; one cannot expect that the use of psychological criteria will supply us with more than probabilities concerning the natural qualities, dispositions and temperament of the saint. And we must always bear in mind that there is no instrument which can measure the grace of God. This last point requires emphasis because so many of the founders of modern psychology were dominated by materialistic ideas and based their method on atheistic principles.

An example of the right use of psychological method is to be found in a recent study by J. Warszawski, S. J. on the handwriting of St. Stanislaus Kostka. Without knowing the identity of the writer a number of experts in graphology came to the same conclusion: the natural temperament of this boy was extremely strong and fiery. Naturally speak-

ing, he was not that sweet and angelic individual so often described by his biographers; he only became so with the help of God's grace. Again, psychological investigations have established beyond doubt that Julian of Norwich was neither an hysteric, neuropath, nor schizophrenic.

These examples serve to show the uses of experimental psychology in the field of hagiography. We need not stress the fact that the Church is well aware of possible abuses.

LITERATURE

It goes without saying that biographies of the saints should possess all the qualities that make good writing. Experience shows that modern readers prefer events to be placed in their chronological order; and that they want *facts*, not professorial exhortations. Intelligent people are well aware that the depths of the human personality ultimately defies description. They would have the author penetrate as far as possible; but he must, at the same time, maintain the profoundest respect for the subject's human personality, and for the hidden and mysterious ways of God. What is more, the intelligent reader must be left to draw his own conclusions and make his own judgement. And even if less well-informed readers need more guidance in forming their judgements, they do not wish and ought not to be "preached at".

THEOLOGY

Here we come to the heart of the matter. The saints are proposed by the Church as models of perfect Christian living. This implies that the life of the saint is indeed worthy

of imitation; and that the circumstances of those who are exhorted to follow the saint's example are identical with or comparable to his. This is in fact what theology teaches us. Therefore a writer must show:

- a) that the saints are *human* beings composed of soul and body, flesh and blood.
- b) that the saints are human beings in *history*, subject to the consequences of original sin; that they are tempted both from without and from within, and are not absolutely free from committing at least some semi-deliberate actual sins even after the so-called conversion. Only our Lord on account of the Hypostatic union, and Mary as a consequence of her divine maternity were completely immune from original and actual sin.
- c) that the consequences of the Redemption are the same for them as for all mankind. It follows that the way of Christian perfection, for them as for us, is one of purification; it is therefore painful and almost always a *gradual* process.

The hagiographer must obviously have a true and exact idea of what sanctity is according to Scripture and Tradition. He ought to be acquainted with the wide and learned study of beatification and canonization made by Prospero Lambertini (Pope Benedict XIV), the *Magna Carta* of the Church's judicial examination of Causes. In his description and interpretation of the saint, he must always distinguish clearly between the essential elements of holiness or of the exercise of heroic virtue, and the accidental. The essential elements

are, on the negative side, the avoidance of sin; and positively, that prompt, constant, and zealous exercise of virtue whose motive is divine charity. What is essential to holiness is heroic, supernatural charity based on Faith and Hope. The accidental elements such as visions, locutions, ecstasies or the power of working miracles are of much less importance.

It is necessary, for the hagiographer to show the saint as growing *gradually* in likeness to Christ, and being impelled to sacrifice and suffering in imitation of Him. At the same time, to accept as a principle "the greater the penance, the greater the sanctity" would be a great mistake: extraordinary penance is not essential to holiness. The hagiographer must also insist that heroic sanctity - as, indeed, our whole supernatural life - presupposes nature, and that spiritual joy, not sadness is characteristic of the saint; in fact, "a saint that is sad is a sad sort of saint"; the real saint finds God in all things and is capable of rejoicing in flowers, animals and little daily happenings. If we deny this, we are halfway to Jansenism and have lost all understanding of true humility. On the other hand, the writer must avoid the other extreme - the modern Pelagianism which insists so much on purely human qualities as practically to deny the fact of the Fall and the workings of grace. We do not say that the average writer deliberately takes up any of these false positions; but that many are only partially informed, or not sufficiently mature in their theological and spiritual judgements.

One of the greatest dangers which confronts the hagiographer is to present the saint as a "Sign" of God's Omnipotence and a "miracle" of the action of grace

to such an extent as to ignore or seriously under-estimate man's free collaboration with the grace of God. The result is that the reader is far from being "edified" - i.e. encouraged to imitate the saint as an example of what Christ achieves in anyone who allows Him to *live in* his heart. He is, on the contrary, discouraged and led to conclude that such holiness is utterly beyond his reach. Erroneous doctrine, injected through the subtle medium of biography, is not easily eradicated; especially as it may reach a reading public which is incapable of seeing what is wrong.

But, by the same token, sound hagiography can have a positive effect that is equally profound and far more attractive than any abstract thesis. It can present to us the figure of someone who, whilst living on this earth as we do, gave himself unconditionally to Christ. Such a life of union and identification with Him cannot fail to attract.

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