

LIVES OF SAINTS FOR CHILDREN

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IN talking about lives of saints for children, I have divided the subject up into three sections according to age. This is arbitrary, but I had to divide it somehow. The first section is about children under seven, the second from seven to twelve, and the third from thirteen to sixteen or seventeen, or perhaps for boys a bit later. There are of course enormous changes within these age ranges, but the great upheaval caused by the dawn of reason and conscience, and the still greater changes that take place at puberty are some justification for this. It is clear that a lot of what I say applies to all the groups, and that all such general divisions are to some extent misleading and annoying, but I could see no way of avoiding them without chaos.

The interest of a child in saints can be said to begin only when he first asks 'What is a saint?'. Children between four and seven are of an age to enjoy stories about saints in the same way that they enjoy stories about witches, princesses and dragons. Legends of medieval saints are very popular with six-year-olds, and the more extravagant the miracles the more they enjoy them. I do not think there is any need to worry if these stories are not clearly distinguished in their minds from fairy stories; the values are very similar, the clear-cut moral black and white, the fantasy, the adventure. Side by side with the hero surviving fantastic adventures for the sake of a golden-haired princess, they will see the hermit braving the onslaught of the devil for the sake of God. I do not think it is any use at this stage to try to explain how the saints fit into history; to the very young, St Simon Stylites and St Thérèse of Lisieux are contemporaries, both living in that misty period called 'a long time ago'. There is, however, one thing that I do consider important even at this early stage, and that is that one should never pretend that stories which are either purely legendary or even of slightly doubtful truth, are really true. I do not mean that one should preface all stories by an explanation of what a legend is, but rather that it should be an understood thing that stories told in this fairy-story mood

are not in the same category as stories from the Bible, or the truths of religion. Most children will recognize the difference of mood quite easily and will not be worried by it.

It is curious that when we say 'Lives of Saints', we scarcely ever think of the saints who are in a sense the most familiar to us: the saints of the New Testament. Yet they are the most rewarding and appeal equally to all ages. Even for little children there is a fascination in those people who lived with our Lord, and whereas there are some saints who appeal more to certain ages or temperaments, these are for everybody. Their interest for younger children is quite different from that of the 'fairy tale saints', for they are in the 'really real' category.

I have talked about what sort of things interest small children, but there are two more aspects of the subject of saints and small children to be considered. First of all, how best can these stories be 'got over' to a child? I do feel rather strongly that for young children *written* lives of saints are a second-best. The ideal is for the mother, father, or teacher to *tell* these stories in their own words, using the kind of vocabulary, imagery and allusion which they know from experience to be familiar to that particular child or group of children. I think this applies even to stories from the New Testament, because one of the best ways of getting a child to read the Bible himself is to tell the stories repeatedly, using language that is gradually nearer and nearer to that of Scripture, so that in the end when he hears the New Testament read in English, or opens its pages himself, he will suddenly say, 'Oh yes, Mummy told us about that'. For a child, familiarity is the best preparation for acceptance and affection. I know that, to many people, telling stories seems a terrible ordeal. We are all so self-conscious and diffident. But it really is worth the effort, especially as many of the stories of saints written for small children are unbearably coy and often inaccurate (which is not at all the same thing as a little fantastical).

Finally, what effect does all this have on the four-to-seven-year-old? First of all, it makes the idea of holiness familiar, so that it becomes an accepted thing that spiritual values are paramount, that sanctity is worth striving for. This does not mean that children will try to become saintly. There are exceptions, of course, but in most cases it will scarcely affect their moral behaviour at all. The two things do not really connect at this age.

What they will almost certainly do is to *pretend* to be saints, either purely in their imaginations, or acting it, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups. At this stage children prepare for grown-up life by pretending, by playing at it; they play at doctors and nurses, at mothers and fathers, and monks and nuns, and also at being saints. It is not funny to them, and it is important not to laugh or to be surprised when the little girl who was 'seeing visions of our Lady' a few minutes ago is pulling her brother's hair and shrieking unlady-like insults. They learn by pretending, and if left alone may end by learning the fundamental lessons of love and self-denial that it is the purpose of saints' lives to teach us.

From about the age of seven an intelligent child will want to read a lot, and the time for *telling* stories passes, because the child's need for exact information is almost impossible to satisfy on the spur of the moment. The stage from seven to twelve is in many ways the most interesting of all. During these years the child does most of its basic learning in all subjects—and I don't mean only school ones—and anyone who has lived with children of this age knows what interesting companions they can be: intelligent, enquiring, sensible, with a curious maturity and clear-sightedness that usually disappears with the beginning of adolescence. I think it is important to remember that at this age children *feel* very grown-up, and will often be more at ease with really grown-up people than with children of, say, fourteen or fifteen.

What sort of saints, then, will appeal to these critical and serious-minded people? Saints who *did* things, I think, who travelled and built, who organized and fought and argued and ruled. There will always be children who are natural mystics, who grasp the truths of religion with their hearts, and to these the saints will appeal simply because they are God's friends and therefore worth knowing. For most, though, I think it is true to say that at this age children like straightforward stories best, stories of achievement and heroism. Very popular are such people as St Hilda, St Columba, St Patrick, St Thomas of Canterbury, whose lives are exciting and where the background is relatively simple, the issues clear-cut. For this reason many post-Reformation saints are not suitable. The situations with which they had to deal are too complicated, the conflict of personalities is too subtle. St Thérèse of Lisieux, for example, is in my opinion quite unsuitable for children of this age. Her real message is too difficult for

them to understand; all they absorb is the superficial childishness and cloying sweetness.

What sort of books do we want for this age group? The depressing truth is that it is very difficult to find really good ones. There are of course hundreds of stories of saints available, but the chief trouble with many of them is that the individual lives are too short. There are too many in each book, and the result is usually scrappy and unsatisfying. The second common fault is deliberate childishness. I think it is very important that lives of saints written for children, even those as young as eight or nine, should be scholarly. There is no need to write down to the child's level; it is the self-conscious childishness of some writers that makes their work so nauseating. I mean the kind of writing where the author seems constantly to be pausing to say 'aren't children sweet?', or to indulge in sly grown-up jokes. One curious aberration I have come across is a habit of putting capital initial letters to all the more important words. Writing for children should be straightforward and natural, and it will be perfectly comprehensible provided the author keeps to a range of ideas which is within the grasp of the age-group for which he is writing. It does not matter, even, if the vocabulary is rather complex, because, provided the subject has caught the child's interest, he will make the effort necessary to guess at the meaning of a new word from the context. In this connection, one need only think of Beatrix Potter's books for small children. The language is adult and straightforward, but the subject matter is suited to the children, which is why they continue to enjoy the stories even when they know every word by heart.

There are many stories of saints which are pleasant to read and avoid coyness, but which fail to make any distinction between legend and established historical fact. There is no need to be pedantic about it, and there is certainly a place for legends; but I do not think it is a good idea to leave the impression that the saints live in a sort of cloud-cuckoo land that bears no relation to the ordinary workaday life we have to live. The saints made history as much as or more than kings and generals. They should be given credit for it. Europe, and indeed the whole world, is patterned by the tracks of missionary saints, and children of ten and eleven to love find on the map the places where they went. At this age, also, they are beginning to grasp historical sequence,

and they like to fit the saints into history. They have an almost insatiable appetite for information, and it is the author's business to supply it.

Before considering the effect we should expect from all this, I would like to look again at the New Testament saints. Again, I think, a different approach is necessary. Except for St Paul, who is rather too complicated a person for this age-group, there is not enough authentic material here for a full-length story of each of the saints. I would therefore do without any books except the actual Scripture narrative. This is where family reading aloud from Scripture is invaluable. It is easy to encourage questions about a particular person in the story, and to start informal discussions, gradually drawing conclusions about what kind of person he or she was. This is a good way of learning about our Lady, too, as a real person in a solid imaginable background, not just a pretty statue in church.

What results can we hope for from all this reading and talking? First of all, a more conscious awareness of the place of God in ordinary life. Most of us spend the greater part of our lives in material pursuits. We know that we can make all we do into an act of worship, but whatever the inward intention, what we do—cooking, typing, scrubbing, digging, or making cars—looks very much like what everyone else does. It follows that, as a child grows, it is necessary somehow to show him that supernatural things come first, because this will not be evident from the things he sees us doing. The lives of the saints are a great help in this, because in them he can *see* that God stood first and influenced all their actions. It is also at this age that children may begin consciously to apply lessons learnt from the saints to their own lives. I say this with hesitation because children vary so much, and it will always be only a small minority in which the spark of supernatural life lighted by baptism will burn up to a blaze: with most of us it is never more than a nice warm fire with the draught cut down to help it stay in all night. With children whose spiritual life is really developing, the pretending of earlier years may give way to a direct imitation of favourite saints, at first rather crude and clumsy and superficial, later a little deeper and more personal. I think, on the whole, these things are best left apparently unnoticed. But children are very literal-minded and it may be necessary to explain that the inconvenience caused

by colds and sore throats outweighs any benefit that might come from setting up as a hermit at the bottom of the garden. On the other hand, a first idea of what prayer really is may come from reading about the saints, and a child who suddenly longs for solitude should have at least a little, if it is at all possible. For this grown-up co-operation may be necessary, especially when a large family is living in a small house or flat. I know that this is not directly connected with lives of saints, but the whole purpose of teaching children about the saints is to feed their spiritual life, and one cannot separate the two things.

The last age-group with which I want to deal is also the most complicated and baffling; the years between thirteen and sixteen for girls, and roughly fourteen to eighteen for boys. So far I have not distinguished between the tastes of boys and girls, because the differences are obvious and superficial. Children tend to be interested in saints of their own sex, and boys usually go for war and adventure rather than for more pacific achievements. These differences, of course, are by no means universal. But with adolescence the differences are bound to become much more marked, so much so that it is necessary to deal with the two sexes in turn. I am not, of course, implying that a clear line can be drawn. There are plenty of boys with feminine qualities—and they are not necessarily effeminate—and there are many girls with a masculine outlook and character, which again does not mean that they need be tomboyish or unfeminine. But for the sake of clarity the division is necessary.

When I was preparing this paper, and came to the point where I had to say something about boys of this age, I realized that I did not know nearly enough about them, so I consulted someone who is well-informed on the subject: a house master in a large public school. He found my questions difficult to answer, because he said the saints did not seem to play much part in the spiritual life of the boys in his charge. He told me that the exception to this was a very real devotion to our Lady. In Catholic children this devotion is so inbred as to be almost instinctive; to them the Mother of God is an abiding and comfortable presence. I doubt, though, whether she is thought of as a real person in the sense that people they meet are real. They know that she is, but they do not think about her in that way. Apart from our Lady, it seems that boys are only likely to read lives of saints when they

are in retreat. It looks as if at this age a boy's spiritual life tends to go underground for a time, his religious observances are more or less a matter of habit, though not less sincere for that. Religious instruction is just another lesson to be learnt, and its conscious application to everyday life is very rare. I cannot help feeling that interest in the saints would be a useful link between faith and practice, and the lack of this interest is due at least partly to the lack of the right kind of books. Boys of fifteen or sixteen who are prepared to read a book at all, are quite capable of dealing with a full-length biography. We expect these boys to read Dickens and even Shakespeare with understanding, but when it comes to lives of saints we offer them potted novelized lives, several of them in one volume and generally inaccurate. Any boy of intelligence can see at once that the writers of these books rate his capacity for thought even lower than does the author of the average adventure story. Of course the capacity for sustained reading increases over the period, but at all stages the important thing is that the ideas should be within the child's range. Within this range the form should be straightforward and adult. The tendency to underrate a child's intelligence in religious matters is not confined to books about saints, and I think one of the reasons why many children, boys especially, stop practising their Faith after they leave school, is that they are not expected to grow up spiritually at the same rate that they grow intellectually. While they are expected to deal with complicated problems in physics, or make some attempt to read *Hamlet* intelligently, their spiritual life remains at a ten-year-old level. It would surely be a good idea to expect rather more, and really intelligent and perceptive lives of saints like St Augustine, St Ignatius or St Vincent could be of great value. Most boys will not touch a book about the spiritual life, but they need a hero, even though they would never admit it. The saints fulfil this need, and link up the apparently barren definitions of the religious doctrine class with real life. Often the only connection in which saints are mentioned to adolescent boys is that of purity, and to many of them the subject is so embarrassing that they may well take a violent dislike to the saint in question. St Aloysius is unpopular for this reason. The facts of the almost unbelievable debauchery and cruelty of his period and country are not likely to be known to most boys, and without this knowledge his behaviour is bound

to seem not pure but fantastically prudish. This is only one example of using the saints as pegs to hang virtues on; an excellent way of making them disliked. Saints are people, and the only way of making them a help to children, or grown-ups, for that matter, of either sex is to make them liked as people. If they are liked and admired, they may serve as examples, not the other way round.

If adolescent boys are in danger of suppressing their spiritual awareness to the point of extinction, many girls are in danger of over-emotionalizing it. Girls of this age tend to be emotional about something, and if it is not about a young man they know, a film star, or a school mistress, it may be about God. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Because this kind of religious feeling is closely allied to awakening sexual emotion, there is no reason to distrust it, but it may need to be guided into useful channels. The saints are a great help in giving a sane direction to the energy that such emotions generate. The practical ability of even the most exalted of mystics is an excellent antidote to sentimentality. The wit and decisiveness of St Teresa of Avila, the earthy common-sense St Bernadette, the practical heroism of people like St Madeleine Sophie Barat, and St Frances Cabrini—these are examples of heroines who can really help a growing girl.

Here again suitable books are few. But there are some, and to them the same remarks apply as to books for boys. They must not underestimate the intelligence of the child. There is no need to make allowances for the less intelligent, because their needs are quite different, and must therefore be met in a different kind of book. In any case probably only a reasonably intelligent child will read a book for pleasure: a book, as opposed to a magazine or a comic. I do stress the need for full-length lives. Saints about whom little is known remain shadowy figures to the young and are not likely to appeal to them. There is certainly room for short introductions to the lives of several saints, rather on the lines of the anthologies of favourite saints that have appeared for grown-ups, but they should aim at arousing further interest, and lead on to fuller biographies. It is the scrappy, fanciful lives, a jumble of legend, fact and imagination that I deplore. Incidentally, I do not at all condemn *novels* about saints; on the contrary, if they are well done they can be a wonderful introduction. In a novel the writer is expected to supply the gaps in history from his

imagination. This is not at all the same thing as putting in imaginary scenes as though they were history, or distorting events to make a better story, or even sheer carelessness. When a responsible author writes for other grown-ups, he does not make allowances for possibly stupid readers, nor make their ignorance an excuse for inaccuracy: he writes as well as he can. If writers for children would adopt the same standards, there would be fewer silly books on the shelves.

I would have liked to have ended by showing that the lives of married saints can be a help in training young people for the pleasures and responsibilities of Christian marriage. But they are not. It looks as if, up to recent years, the Church had tended to look at married people, not the sacrament of course, with the eyes of the Roman world in which she was born. At that time it was a degrading and often purely commercial arrangement, and holiness in that state must have seemed almost inconceivable. In the Middle Ages the blessing of the Church was superimposed on a social and biological necessity in which love had no place. Later the idea of romantic love seemed totally opposed to Christian ideas, and marriage became little more than a badge of respectability, and the necessary but unpleasant means of producing a family. The married saints in the calendar either endured marriage as a necessity, or were early bereaved and achieved sanctity as widows or widowers. There must have been through the centuries hundreds of saintly married couples, but they have seldom been canonized. Possibly this age of the lay-apostolate will help to correct the balance, and in a few hundred years young people will have to help them the example of saints who became holy through marriage. But at this moment that is small comfort; in this respect the lives of the saints are not illuminating.

Finally, I would like to stress one very important point. The holiness of the saints is only a reflection of the perfect holiness of Christ. The purpose of teaching children about the saints is to help them to become more like Christ by following the example of those who themselves loved and followed him. In order to do this, we try to make the children see the saints as real, human, understandable people, each dealing with particular and different problems. We hope that they will learn to love the saints and be encouraged by them, just because their lives were subject to the

same limitations as ours. But there is a real danger in this, that in contrast to the humanness of the saints we should allow Christ himself to seem so exalted as to be almost inhuman. If the saints are real, then Christ is real with a much more vivid reality, and we must not let him vanish from the children's eyes in a cloud of doctrine which does not touch the heart. The human limitations and everyday circumstances of the saints' lives bring them near to us, make them not types but individuals. But when we teach children about Christ, he seems too often to have no individuality at all.

I have talked about reading and discussing the New Testament to discover what kind of people the first saints were. Surely it is even more important to use this method to make children see our Lord as a real person in a particular place and situation. He must not seem to the children merely supremely holy, wise and loving, because these things are in danger of remaining only words to them. They must learn to think of him as a person who walked in a particular way, whose nose was a particular shape, who had recognizable mannerisms, habits of voice, personal turns of phrase. The lives of saints should illuminate for us the life of God made man; not just Man with a capital M, but one particular man. They should lead back to him. If they do not, if they come to seem to the children more real and interesting than the Incarnate God of whose perfect humanity theirs is only a reflection, then our teaching of religion is upside down and we have failed in the task entrusted to us.



THE MAKING OF AN IMAGE

MICHAEL CLARK

CHRISTIAN art in its broad sense is generally taken to mean any creative work done by an artist who is a professing Christian. Today I wish to consider a particular aspect of Christian art, that is work carried out for, and applied to churches, chapels, or schools, with particular reference to images of the Saints.

In the first place let us consider the attitude of mind the artist