

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

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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

biographical stride, though sometimes it is, I feel, a trifle sketchy—lacking in incident shall I say:

And all the time that Adam lived

came to 930 years; and he died.

Seth also lived a hundred and five years, and begot Enos.

And Seth lived after he begot Enos, 807 years: and begot sons and daughters.

And all the days of Seth were 912 years: and he died.

But Genesis in the passage quoted does offer us some very fundamental biographical facts; would that many lives of the saints contained so many.

Now for a biography to succeed it must portray a man or woman to the life; we say of a portrait painter that he has 'caught' his subject, and that is what a biographer must do; he must give a living portrait of his subject. The background must be painted in, of course; we must see the subject of the book living and moving against the events of his time and place, but the man or woman must so far as possible come to life. With the saints this is additionally important, for if their lives make up the history of the Church to a very large extent, it has also to be remembered that they are essentially the manifestation of the holiness of Christ in the souls of men. If they are to be an example for us (for our imitation or admiration) they must live for us, their lives must be recounted in biographies that are very models of their kind, and if they are to live in the books written about them and stand out before the background of their place and times they must be depicted as human beings. I am not interested in the inhuman kind of creature that is sometimes exhibited to us as an example of holiness. And that is why I think it is a mistake to talk about saints in the way that is sometimes common—angelic (St Aloysius), seraphic (St Teresa and St Francis) and a few other terms of the sort—they *can* of course be explained but they at once raise a barrier between subject and reader. Grace builds on, perfects nature, we are told. But if we are to have a living portrait of the man or woman the first requisite is to get the natural part right and if, when his subject has reached the age of ten (say) angels and seraphs have become the biographer's current coin, he has got precious little left when at the end of his subject's life grace has done its work and all the papers are ready to be packed up and sent off to the Congregation of Rites. So there is the first problem

for the hagiographer: he has to remember that he is dealing with *a man or woman in the world*, this workaday world, who encountered conditions, temptations, opposition, success and failure, who had to put up with all sorts of things that we, too, are familiar with; propensities, physical and mental traits with which they had to live just as we have with our own, all sorts of factors which, on a last analysis, by the help of grace were directed to the glory of God and, perfected by grace, made the saint; not an idealized figure but a person and an individual different from all others.

So often the saints as we have grown used to seeing them, or I should say, as a common school of hagiography has accustomed us to seeing them, are not men, living beings, who will help us by their example to continue on our way in the world; no, they seem almost to act as temptations to us to leave the world, to escape, to see the world in false colours when in fact we are incapable of seeing it in its true guise. This picture of them is untrue. They are not strange beings, impossible creatures like the plaster statues show them, and when you can forget for a moment or two the great occasions of their lives, which, after all, occurred on only a few days or months, which formed the exception to the humdrum routine of daily life, you see that their lives touched ours, often very closely; some biographies seem to fasten with avidity on the ecstasies and the other phenomena, but they forget very largely the twenty or thirty or fifty years that went before, that provided the background and the way to this experience; the half century or more with its incidence of toothache, corns, or stomach-ache, money difficulties, struggles with besetting temptations, a tendency to domineer or touchiness at breakfast, for example, and the like, that formed their constant companions. After all, it is not unconsoling to think that money troubles, persistent indigestion or a tendency to lift the elbow, if properly used, may lead to great holiness, to heroic virtue such as is required for canonization.

It is the same with physical mortifications. When a saint undertakes some mortification he does not make a fuss about it; it does not last all day. The real discipline that the Curé d'Arns for example gave himself was his confessional; he died worn out by hearing the confessions of others. Think, too, of the difficulties of St John Bosco at the height of his career when he was, I venture to put it so, a leading national figure: continually he was beset by

petty difficulties of one sort or another, difficulties such as all of us have to face but which are not usually to be found in combination with the important matters with which he was dealing.

Difficulties and trials were the background of his life, the factors with which he had to contend in carrying out his work. They served to increase his sense of urgency; so much to be done and so many obstacles always in the way. He was busy about the Italian bishoprics and must write some dozens of letters of a highly confidential nature, but first he must send a word to the railway company to see if he could induce them to grant a reduction in fares for an outing for his boys. He wanted to get his seminary for late vocations started, but first he must see to the baker's bill that Don Rua tells him is overdue and very high. He must put the finishing touches to an important document to be sent to the Pope, but first he must go to dine with the Marchese Fassati who had promised him alms if he would grace his table. And so it went on. (Although we haven't the appointment of the English hierarchy on our hands, we *do* find people and things which waste our time in an annoying fashion.)

So if the biography of the saint is to be a living picture the first problem of the hagiographer is to pay attention to the ordinary things of life, of everyday life: otherwise he will present an unnatural wooden figure of his saint to the world; no example or help to the ordinary reader, but merely, I venture to say, a hindrance to the development of the Christian life in the souls of many.

Even so I have not finished with this first problem. The saint, I said, must be depicted against the background of his time and place. It is not always realized how important this is. If this background must not intrude it must none the less be there for it made a very great difference to the man or woman whose life is being written. So often I find that books fail in this respect; it is of interest to know the price of bread, for example, not so much in terms of our modern money but in terms of work; how long did a man have to work to earn a loaf of bread and so on. One of the most interesting lives in this respect could be that of St Benedict Labre; but I think that I have read more than my fair share of them and still have to encounter one that gives any adequate topographical or economic information to set off the extraordinary life of this patron of hikers and displaced persons. The first point, then, is to get the ordinary natural part of the man's

or woman's life right: with its background of time and place. That I think is of importance, but I shall enlarge on the topic no more and pass on to the next question of extraordinary phenomena, together with the miraculous element in the lives of the saints, in a word the wonders and marvels with which the whole subject of hagiography is bedevilled—I use the word advisedly.

It has often struck me on reading the lives the of saints—the saints of all periods—how the biographers pepper their pages with marvels as if it was the most natural thing in the world for a man to walk on the water, for example, fly through the air or raise people from the dead. They are so matter-of-fact about it that the things cease to be marvels at all and the real marvel would be to find a saint's life without them. We are told that alleged miracles are investigated with scrupulous and meticulous accuracy before ecclesiastical approval is given to them. That is true no doubt of some, but of the vast majority that crop up with unfailing monotony in the lives of God's servants we are without not only this approval but also the evidence on which such approval could be given. And I am not thinking especially of medieval saints (there the marvels are notorious), but of men and women almost of our own times, whose lives in some sense overlapped our own: St Teresa of Lisieux was born and died during the manhood of my own father; I have met four people who knew Don Bosco well: one of them was an Englishman; and I expect you can think of other saints and holy persons whose lives are even nearer our own. Now of course I am not denying miracles as such, but I do say that possibly they are rarer than we imagine or at any rate occur more seldom than some books would have us believe. But the chief thing I think for the writer of saints' lives to bear in mind is that if he has a miracle on his hands he should at least deal with it as a miracle, not as an everyday occurrence. The cheaper variety of pious book deals with them of course as current coin with no idea of the difficulties that they raise in men's minds. My own favourite is the alleged miracle worked by St Teresa of Lisieux after her death in favour of a poverty-stricken Carmelite convent in Italy—Gallipoli, I think it was. The cash box was empty and the nuns of course were at their wits end; someone at this juncture thought of Sr Teresa, who had died then fairly recently in far away France with the reputation of holiness and was becoming known as a

wonder worker; she was appealed to and this was what happened. That night a unknown nun came to the prioress's room (the prioress, by the way, seems to have noticed nothing odd about there being an unknown nun in the convent) and told her to look again in the cashbox. After thinking about it for some time she did so and was surprised to find that it contained a considerable sum of money in notes which solved all immediate difficulties. Well and good. Let us take it for granted that this happened. We are still faced with the difficulty of where the notes came from; presumably they bore a serial number or the bank would not accept them. If they were genuine, who lost them? If they were not genuine, in the sense of not being issued by the bank of Italy, the bank lost in the long run.

This problem of miracles brings us face to face with another, that of those phenomena usually known as mystical—levitation, precognition or clairvoyance, stigmata and so on—though they are by no means confined to mystics and some of them are of more frequent occurrence among people whose description is hardly to be found in the pages of St John of the Cross or Poulain. (Rasputin is a useful example.) Stigmata, and allied manifestations, I have long been accustomed to describe as the occupational hazard if not the occupational disease of the mystics. It would be better to drop the term 'mystical' and substitute, perhaps, 'preternatural'. We seem to be on the verge of important discoveries in connexion with the powers of the mind; it is important therefore that those who encounter extraordinary phenomena in writing the lives of the saints should deal with them in a way that is not at variance with what has been so far established. It is not necessary to view every such manifestation as an example of those *charismata* which we know to have been bestowed on some men and women, and we should be chary of excessive emphasis on all sorts of phenomena which, on a last analysis, are not only nothing to do with sanctity but are signs sometimes of a neurotic condition.

Von Hügel offers the suggestion that certain impacts of the supernatural are too weighty for the delicately adjusted mechanisms of the human mind and that those who have enjoyed a full mystical experience have also suffered from a kind of nervous or mental illness. But that is not an explanation that covers all cases by any means. I quote from Count de la Bedoyère's biography of von Hügel (p. 110).

'As to the relationship between sanity (or rather insanity) and sanctity, the baron suggested four strata, the relationships within which have to be very carefully worked out. The lowest stratum is the mystics' physical life, with its nervousness, illness, hysteria etc.; the next or second stratum is their visions and ecstasies etc.; the third is their spiritual teaching; and the highest stratum is "their deliberate action, interior and exterior". Between the first and second there is a closer relationship, i.e. their physical health is closely concerned with their unusual behaviour, and vice-versa. But between that first stage of physical hysteria and the like and the two highest stages, their doctrine and their actual mystical life, there was no relation in the sense at least of a morbid or suspicious relationship.'

That is enough concerning certain problems inherent in the subject of hagiography, though it by no means exhausts all of the problems facing the man who sits down to produce the life of a saint. Like any biographer he has all the problems that arise in writing a book, problems of style: in his case avoidance of the pious cliché, devout jargon (and until you begin on this kind of work you can have no idea how much of it there is) and so on.

But we can leave these problems and consider, very shortly, three others which are external to the work. The first I shall call the problem of the vested interest. Imagine that you are inspired (which is unlikely) or commissioned (more probably) to write the life of 'St Cornucopia'; all goes well until your publisher sends the book to one of the religious belonging to the congregation founded by her to give an opinion on it, and it is found that you have not presented the 'official' account of her life. You will then have to cope with the opposition (I could quote cases in which it has been quite unscrupulous) of the religious congregation which may go to any lengths to hinder publication of your book. There are ways of dealing with this but I need not detail them here. Allied to this difficulty is that of pious ears which like the poor are always with us. I can only say in this connexion that while we should not set out to shock (though shock treatment sometimes works in this as in some other mental disorders) generally speaking we must disregard this particular problem, only echoing the prayer (I think it was von Hügel's) that authority would either define pious ears, or issue a list of them.

Lastly there is looming over you the dark figure of the theo-

logical censor. Providing that he sticks to his job he need be no problem at all and I may say that I have known of censors who have been extremely helpful. Nevertheless there are others who appear either to have learnt their theology by heart or to have such an exalted view of their functions that they do not confine themselves to seeing that the book is not theologically unsound but venture into history and even politics. And, of course, there are ways sometimes of dealing with them though it is possibly more difficult for the clergyman than it is for the layman. But there is this aspect of the question that is sometimes unrealized. If an *Imprimatur* is a protection to the faithful (though it is not so always by any means; an *Imprimatur* seems almost a pre-requisite for a book to be put on the Index), it is also for the non-Catholic a powerful deterrent. He picks the book from the library shelves, looks at the first page or two, sees as so often a black gothic *Imprimatur* and puts the book back on the shelves with the thought, 'Oh, that's R.C., I shan't read that'.

I have not exhausted all the problems by any means; there is the problem of presenting an Italian saint to Englishmen, for example (so often when it has been done successfully in the sense that the Englishman accepts him it is not the Italian saint any more, but a product of the writer's imagination), and vice-versa. Holiness is universal, but its mode of expression differs. There is no doubt that St Dominic Savio was a very holy youth, but to present him truthfully and adequately to English boys is a task of some delicacy. Indeed, with many of the youthful saints of other, especially Latin, countries, one has the unfortunate impression that they must have been not unlike the choirboy in one of P. G. Wodehouse's books. Some of them appear to us as unutterable prigs, but it is difficult to tell whether that is the fault of their biographers or themselves. It is significant that there is no exact equivalent for 'prig' in French, and on that self-righteous English note I will conclude, leaving the rest of the problems to you.