

BLESSED NICOLAUS VON DER FLUE

BY

D. M. CAMPBELL

BLESSED NICOLAUS was a hermit, respected and beloved not only by his contemporaries, but to this day in his native land of Switzerland, in his great shrine in Sachsen, and in several chapels as well as his own memorial chapel at Ranft.

The Swiss believe that it was owing to his prayers and protection that their country was immune in the 1914-18 war and in this one; and the gratitude of the nation has shown itself in a large fresco painted in his memorial church at Ranft, showing Switzerland as a sort of island, upheld by Blessed Nicolaus, amidst the general welter of slaughter and suffering of the rest of Europe. He is considered one of the nation's heroes, indeed, had it not been for his prophetic vision and wisdom Switzerland might never have become a country at all.

Nicolaus had many visions, but in the first great vision he suffered pains; for God, in one moment, freed his body from the bands of necessities such as other men are heir to; the piercing light raised him from the ground, and taught him he was to seek all in God. Roots that had been fixed in earth must be removed to heaven where every necessity for body and soul was to be sought.

Blessed Nicolaus was born in 1417; his father's cottage was near to the Lake of the Four Cantons, i.e. the Lake of Lucerne, in one of the most beautiful parts of a beautiful country. Mountains silvered with eternal snows tower behind the forest-clad hills, green slopes of grassy fields run down to the waters of the great lake; streams and waterfalls, picturesque villages, venerable churches, a simple and devout people of whom the greater part were shepherds, these were the place and people among whom Blessed Nicolaus grew up. It seems proper that under the influence of the grandeur and beauty of nature a soul should be more susceptible to supernatural influences. Beholding as it were the fringe of the divine vesture it seeks the Maker of all things more readily in thankful love and adoration.

Blessed Nicolaus lived from childhood a life of mortification, and from his early years was fond of solitude; he grew up a stalwart beautiful child, strong and healthy. In his 23rd year he fought in the war against Zürich, and some years later was in command of a company of men. It is related of him that his devotion and love of God were such that he went into battle with his sword in one hand and his rosary in the other.

About this time he married happily and was blessed with an offspring of ten children. He was zealous in educating his family, no light task in those days. This education certainly bore fruit, for we know that several of his sons rose to high positions in the state and one at least became a Priest.

In the year 1467 the great change occurred and Nicolaus had his first vision. He was at this time holding an official post at Obwalden, where he was well known for his just dealings and good works. In this vision, which appeared to him several times, he beheld the head of our Lord, crowned, surrounded by two golden circles, and from the head three rays went out, and three returned, representing the eternal wisdom of the blessed Trinity. This vision is always shown on his pictures, and also on the shrine, and the walls of the church at Sachsen where he was buried. Nicolaus resolved now that he must leave all and go away alone to live entirely for God. His eldest son John records of his father that although he used to retire nightly with his family and domestics, he had seen him constantly rise from his bed and remain in prayer for the rest of the night, even going out sometimes to go and pray at the old church of St Nicolaus.

Nicolaus now asked permission of his wife to obey God's call, and having obtained her consent he arranged the affairs of the family. Finally, calling together his whole household, he appeared before them clad as a pilgrim, barefooted and bareheaded in a long brown habit with his staff and rosary in his hand. He thanked them all, exhorting them once again to fear God and obey his laws, and having blessed them, set out alone. He declared many years later that this parting was bitter pain to him, but with calmness and confidence he trusted himself to God's guidance.

As he desired to avoid the importunities of his friends, and the imputation of being a mere visionary, he decided to leave his native land. But such was not God's will, for when he reached the Northern frontiers of Burgundy, he was bidden to return to his own land. Upon this spot where the angel spoke to him there is now a chapel and statue of the blessed hermit. It is claimed that from this moment he ceased to take any food or drink and existed for twenty years wholly on the blessed Sacrament which he received three times every month. Müller, the great Swiss historian, relates 'it was strictly examined during his life time; the fame of it went abroad far and near; it was related by his contemporaries to their children, and the belief in it has not weakened even now where the faith of the people has changed' (Hist. of Switzerland, Vol. VI, p. 301.).

Nicolaus, therefore, returned to his own country, and retired into a cavity in one of the Alps called Kluster. Here beneath an old larch tree, amidst briars and undergrowth, he made a small sort of shelter

of branches and leaves. During eight days he remained there, absorbed in prayer, until discovered by huntsmen, who went and informed his brother who came at once to beg him not to expose himself thus to the danger of perishing alone out in the wild. Nicolaus, although having complete trust in God, consented to go and consult the parish priest of Kerns, one Oswald Isner. This priest has left a long narrative of all these events, which may be read in his parish church registers for the year 1488. He directed Nicolaus to go on confiding in God, after observing him closely for some while, and advised him to prolong his fast as long as it seemed God's will. Nicolaus obeyed and for 20 years he existed without food or drink, of which wonderful fact there are many proofs and witnesses. Nicolaus told the priest that at the time of Holy Communion he received such an increase of strength that he could endure the long fast between times without pain.

His fame spread abroad, and he was so besieged by visitors that he was forced to retreat much further into the mountains. He chose the spot at Fleuli-Ranft where his hermitage and little memorial church are to this day. A lovely peaceful green valley, tucked into the side of the thickly-wooded hill, with the little river Melch just below, tumbling and roaring down the ravine. The people of the neighbouring village of Oberwalden held him in great affection and veneration and insisted on building him a small hermitage and chapel. The living room may still be seen; it is up a short flight of steps, at the bottom of which is a life-sized realistic medieval Crucifix; the room is 8 feet square and very low, and as Nicolaus was 6ft. 6ins. tall he could never have been able to stand upright. It has two openings, one looking into the chapel and the other on to the green sward below, where he could converse with his relatives and friends who visited him. It contains a long plank on trestles for bed, with a large round stone for pillow; a small stool, and an ancient painted wooden statue of our Lady and Child. The room remains exactly as when he used it, and is, needless to say, visited yearly by many pilgrims and devout souls. The little church at Ranft is now the memorial church, and the walls are adorned with paintings of his life and death, and on the west wall, the fresco painted since the war of 1914.

At this time Switzerland, although it had emerged victorious after the long wars against Charles the Bold of Burgundy, was torn asunder by internal jealousies and dissensions; everyone seemed intent on his own gains and interests, forgetting, or at any rate putting into the background, the country's needs. At Stans in 1481, in Unterwalden, deputies were assembled from all the confederations. But no agreement could be reached, and things seemed hopeless. The parish priest of Sachsen, the town below Ranft where Nicolaus was, bethought

him of the holy hermit and hurried away to beg him to come down and speak to the meeting. Nicolaus was first a servant of God, but also a true lover of his country. He agreed, and they set out for Stans. This meeting is one of the historical events of Switzerland, for it was only owing to the prophetic vision and wisdom of Nicolaus that a peaceful and wise solution was eventually reached. The cities of Freiburg and Soleure were included in the league, and thus was laid the foundation of the Swiss states as they are today. The chronicle relating the event states that in less than one hour all strife was over, and the dispute was settled. Both the parish priest, Heinrich im Grund, and Nicolaus received from all the people and every part, grateful thanks and many gifts, one of which was an offering for a perpetual Mass in the holy Brother's chapel in the wood.

After this great event blessed Nicolaus had more visitors than ever. Warriors, statesmen, bishops, students, all visited this poor hermit, and all were edified and astonished at his knowledge and grasp, not only of heavenly but of earthly things. A history of his life was written for King Louis XI of France, and there are many records left of him in the great monasteries whose inmates had visited him (the best-known of these accounts is the lengthy one by John von Trittenheir, the learned Abbot of Spanheim).

To all who came to ask his advice, Nicolaus gave the same counsel: that the duty of every christian is to be faithful to his vocation, and that one must not deceive oneself by preferring worldly gain to eternal happiness. This is the true secret of all the saints, of all ages and periods: God's will in his own order.

Before his death, Nicolaus experienced a period of terrible bodily suffering, which however he bore with great joy. As his pains abated he felt the end was near, and begged to be allowed to receive the last sacraments. Surrounded by his sorrowing wife and family and several friends, Nicolaus passed away on the Feast of St Benedict, on his 70th birthday.

His shrine is in the parish church at Sachsen, at the foot of the hill of Fleuli-Ranft where his hermitage and chapel are. It is a costly and beautiful one, over an Altar in front of the choir. A large painting, showing him kneeling before the well-known vision of the Blessed Trinity, forms the outer covering, and when this is drawn up, the body of the saint is disclosed, in a kneeling attitude clad in a gorgeous cope, the head and hands encrusted with precious jewels, sent by friends and admirers from all parts of Europe. His brown habit, much patched, hangs in a case nearby, and a priest gives the blessing with a relic while the pilgrim is allowed to touch the habit. For a century and a half after his death the Catholics of Switzerland endeavoured by all means in their power that he should be raised to the Altars of

the Church. They sent many deputations to Rome until the process was opened.

The account of this first examination is contained in the parish records of Sachsen. In the year 1591 the first council for the beatification was held at Sarnen; deputies from all the Catholic states were there. Fifty-six miracles were proved, and a deputation was sent to Rome to inform the Holy Father.

But at this moment the Pope, Gregory XIV, died and his successor only lived a short time. All this meant delay. But the veneration for and confidence of the people in Nicolaus did not diminish, and in the year 1600 so many pilgrims came to visit his shrine that the church could not contain them. In 1618 Albert Palatim of the Rhine and Duke of Bavaria wrote saying he had heard Nicolaus would shortly be canonised and begging for a relic, as he had always had a devotion to the holy hermit. It was not however until 1669 that the decree of his beatification was published, to the inexpressible joy of the whole country.

Our present Holy Father Pius XII has taken great interest in Blessed Nicolaus, and since the end of this war, devotion to him has increased greatly in his native land, and he is now a canonised saint of the Church. B. Nicolaus's constant prayer was:

O my Lord and my God

Take from me all that keeps me from Thee.

O my Lord and my God

Give me only all that brings me nearer Thee.

O my Lord and my God

Take from me myself

And let me possess only Thee.

'And now let us thank God, who is marvellous in his Saints, and let us beseech our holy brother, Blessed Nicolaus, that by his intercession we may be adorned with all those virtues which during his life shone so brightly around him; that we may be men after God's own heart, and that we may all meet in the eternal joys of heaven. O Lord, the Omnipotent, grant to us this blessing'. Amen.