A SAINT IN ACTION[1]

BIOGRAPHY is beginning to run fiction close in popularity and cheap editions of lives are being published as if they were novels. This vogue is due in great measure to the work of recent writers of ability, and it results in yet other writers turning their talents to the same branch of literature, so that biography is one of the live arts. Like other live things, it changes. In this movement hagiography has fortunately had its share, and it too duly reflects changes in taste. We find the popular lives of the saints that our fathers enjoyed rather stuffy. Even the immediate pre-war fashion is quite evidently out of date.

It is perhaps a little early to decide what absolute improvement there has been in method or style. Such words as *change* and *fashion* are safer than others that sometimes decorate publishers' announcements. The spirit of the age has changed and with it our likes and dislikes. We prefer a different tune, and as, in the long run, it is we who pay the pipers, we often get it. But what Brunetière called 'l'ambition de faire autrement' will not die with this generation. Another fifty years may make our popular lives seem as faded as the Victorian biographies have come to seem. We quite properly find our own brand more readable, but when we are asked to conclude that hagiography has taken a decided turn for the better, we may well pause.

It is still more advisable to pause before admitting another opinion that is a temptation to some readers. I mean the view that the modern 'literary' biography has made the full-length 'Life' obsolete. On the contrary, it is arguable that it has shown that it is indispensable. For

[1] *Monsieur Vincent.* Le grand saint du grand siècle. Par Pierre Coste, Prêtre de la Mission. Three vols. (Paris : Desclée de Brouwer et Cie ; 90 francs.) Over 1,900 clearly printed pages, with many excellent illustrations of interest, a complete bibliography, and a good index of names.

in general (though there are rare exceptions), popular biography depends, or should depend, upon it. It is rather unfortunate that there is only one name for these two kinds of biography, for there is a real difference between them. The one is primarily interpretative, the other primarily historical. I say *primarily,* because there is danger of misunderstanding if these terms are taken as mutually exclusive; but they will serve to mark a general distinction in aim which goes far deeper than mere form.

One of the first virtues of the modern 'literary' biography is that it shall be readable, and readability means, for one thing, that the work shall not be too long. There is in general only room for the main facts and such detail as the writer considers significant. However objective the writer may wish to be, this means interpretation. What is or is not significant depends, of course, on his reading of the life he is writing. Actually, literary biographers seldom pretend to objectivity; they are frankly interpretative. They take us for a personally conducted tour round a life. Time is limited: they show us what they think of interest; they tend to quicken the pace at the duller stretches; they often tell us a good deal about themselves. I am not denying a value to this method, given a good guide. Nor am I denying that it saves a lot of time, with people as with country. It is undoubtedly quicker and less exacting to form a judgment of a man by getting some intelligent person to give his opinion of him and illustrate it with incidents from his career. Further, the impression that a great man makes on other men, and particularly on men of trained sensibility, is not only interesting, but part of our information about him. Only all this is not the same thing as first-hand knowledge. It is a reflected view.

Again, interpretative biography is peculiarly subject to the spirit of the age in which it is written. It reflects the characteristic judgments of its age, and it caters for its tastes. This is particularly easy to observe in lives of the saints. When all allowance is made for better historical sense, it remains true that a modern popular hagiographer

stresses detail that interests modern people and touches lightly, or omits altogether, detail that past generations found far more interesting. I am not for one moment questioning the propriety of this, given his particular purpose; but it undoubtedly has its dangers. For example, there is always the possibility that the sanctity of a saint did not lie in the aspects of his life that we most readily appreciate, unless we happen to be saints ourselves, and what we find least attractive may possibly be most significant.

In short, the interpretative biographer presents a portrait, and a portrait shows you, not simply its subject, but its subject as seen by the artist. It is wise to remember, for hate or for love, that you will not see the original with the same eyes.

The object of what I have called the historical biographer is quite different. His concern is with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and he is not primarily bothered about the sort of picture it will make or the kind of impression it will produce. If his work is well done, we shall ourselves be brought to knowledge of his subject, so far as it can be known, and we shall be in a position to form our own judgment. This is not, of course, so easy of achievement. Even the historical biographer has to select, and he needs an eye for proportion and access to good sources. So here too it is possible to speak of better or worse, though the comparison has no necessary connection with time. Questions of fashion and taste have little to do with it. When proper use has been made of all available sources, the result in this kind is final, even if it be a thousand years old. Indeed later attempts may be definitely inferior through disappearance of sources and growth of conjecture. But, paradoxical as it may appear, fresh sources of information do often come to light in the course of years, and then progress is possible. For knowledge of the subject the historical full-length life will always be supreme. It naturally tends to be long, and it will never compete with the interpretative in popular favour, but it should

always bring grist to its mill. It opens the way to the slower process, akin to that of life itself, of gradual growth in understanding, from first meeting, through acquaintance, to intimacy.

Life is too short for us to follow the whole road with everyone we meet, even if they are great, even if they are saints. One must pick and choose; and one of the uses of the interpretative biographies is to give us introductions to likely people. Sometimes we shall want to know them better. M. Coste, of the Congregation founded by St. Vincent de Paul, has provided us with means of knowing its founder by publishing what is likely to remain the classical life of the saint. St. Vincent is certainly one of the saints whom many people would be glad to know well. For one thing, most people have already been introduced to him, if not by one of the Lives, or by Father Martindale's broadcast talk, then at least by the sight of one of his Sisters of Charity under full sail in our streets. For another, he was a saint of action, and these are days of Catholic Action. And his life has all the makings of a good biography. All saints' lives are interesting, because in the last analysis it is character that gives interest to a life, and nothing really compensates if it be lacking. All the same, sanctity may flower in very narrow places. St. Vincent was not only a saint, but a saint of wide horizons, who was concerned in much of the history of seventeenth century France and in touch with almost all the people of note of his day.

Consider the dates: he was born in 1581 and died in 1660. This period covers the reigns of Henry IV and Louis XIII (St. Vincent was at his death-bed), and the minority of Louis XIV. It saw the Edict of Nantes, the Thirty Years' War, and the Fronde. It was the age of Richelieu and Mazarin. The *Astrée* appeared in 1608, *Le Cid* in 1636, the *Discours de la Méthode* in 1637; in 1635 the French Academy was officially founded; and when St. Vincent died, Racine was of age. The first edition of the *Introduction à la Vie Dévote* is dated 1609, and

Bérulle, Condren, and Olier were alive. These are more than aids to remembering when St. Vincent lived. He touches the history of his age at almost every point, and the same almost embarrassing richness characterises his activities. He had something to do with all the major problems of his times and, as a glance at the index will show, they were many and not unlike our own: war and its aftermath, devastated areas, unemployment, pauperism; not to speak of ecclesiastical education, the reform of the clergy, missions, retreats, the care of foundlings, and the condition of prisoners and galley slaves. They are all fully described in M. Coste's book—the state of things from which the particular need arose, the steps taken by St. Vincent to meet the situation, and the history of the work organised to deal with it.

This careful study of each foundation, with some account of the people concerned in it, has meant abandoning a strictly chronological arrangement of the Life. M. Coste himself considers it unavoidable, and indeed it is difficult to see what else could be done. But it has its disadvantages, and the reader may find it necessary to construct a general outline for himself. He may, too, especially if he has been used to the other kind of biography, feel that there are occasional *longueurs* and wonder what has happened to St. Vincent. A little patience and attention, and it will be found that St. Vincent is revealed, not hidden, in his foundations. For he had that rare gift, which is one of the secrets of successful organization, the capacity both to delegate and to control. He knew how to call out the best work from others, and he never lost touch himself. So that though the narrative may wander very far from Paris—even, indeed, as far as Madagascar—yet it is continually coming back to its centre and adding to our knowledge of Monsieur Vincent. And if the circumference is of infinite variety, the centre is infinitely simple. Few men have been more beset by the multiplicities of this world, few more constantly gathered them up into the love of the one God.

It is interesting to wonder what a man of our own age, who, knowing nothing about St. Vincent, had read only the history of his foundations, would make of the man himself. Here, certainly, was a magnificent organizer, whose organizations, as has often been remarked, not only worked, but have endured. Yet though he would recognize the man of action, he would find that many of the qualities that he associated with the born organiser were apparently lacking. He would expect to find initiative, hustle, self-confidence; and he would find very different things. He would find a man apparently indifferent to the provenance of a good work, quite prepared to wait for other people to suggest, very ready to accept suggestion, always anxious to give of his best. He would find a man intolerably slow to act and exaggeratedly insistent on his own unworthiness. In fact, he would have stumbled on the paradox of Catholic Action.

St. Vincent's principles of action are not peculiar to him. They are to be found in St. Francis de Sales; they might perhaps be summed up in the famous 'il ne faut rien demander, ni rien refuser' (*Entretiens Spirituels*). And they are clearly laid down in more than one passage from Bossuet: await God's time, determined not to fail in your part: follow every opening He gives: any other disposition delays God's work (cf. Letter to Mme. d'Albert, November 17th, 1692). (Incidentally, one way to get the special flavour, if I may so put it, of St. Vincent's teaching is to compare his expression with St. Francis's and Bossuet's of the same truth.) But what makes it especially worth while to study them in him is that they are sometimes held to make for a rather timid passivity. Here, beyond dispute, they very evidently made for something quite different. Thus M. Coste's chapter lxi, *L'homme d'action,* short as it is, repays reading and re-reading.

The key to the paradox that puzzled my hypothetical reader is this, that to St. Vincent the initiative always lay with God. He could think of nothing more fatal than precipitate substitution of the human will for the divine,

and he knew that in one way or another this is apt to happen even in good causes. Thus he would welcome a lead from competent authority, or even from others, for it was a kind of surety against self-will. Thus, even in undertakings he himself set on foot, he could ever see himself as following, though in regard to men he might seem to lead, as obeying, though he might seem to rule. Hence, too, his slowness, so peculiar, so irritating, some people found it. It was not due to reluctance, or cowardice, or human respect; however the divine will might be manifested, it must always be obeyed. It came from a firm determination not to outrun Providence, not, so to say, to force God's hand. Impatience would do nothing to further a divine work; it would only bring self in again by a back door and ruin everything. And in comparison with the perfection of the divine purpose, how miserable the instrument! Others might think him something, but he knew. And so he would stress his own imperfection until people found that too rather peculiar. In this dependence lay his tremendous strength in action. Once the divine will was clear and the work begun, obstacles could not daunt, nor self-seeking deflect, nor apparent failure discourage. He liked small beginings and was not afraid of unpromising material; for, after all, God was behind them. And he was slow to legislate, for experience was another manifestation of the divine will. He had, of course, great practical ability as well; but this was the mode of its action, and this the secret of its lasting results. There is a phrase of Coleridge's that might have been written with St. Vincent in mind: 'In energetic minds, truth soon changes by domestication into power.'

Few people could attempt detailed criticism of this book, and anybody disposed to quarrel with M. Coste's judgment at any point would be faced by two facts to give him pause. The first is the Bibliography, which occupies twenty closely printed pages. The second is a modest entry in it which reads: 'COSTE (Pierre): *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents* . . . 14 vol.

in-8°.' M. Coste is probably right—and in any case, he has himself provided the means to control the Life, if we will. So the ordinary reader, at any rate, will have to change his mind about the date of St. Vincent's birth, amongst other things, and surrender one or two picturesque incidents in the interests of truth. And if he would have examples of judiciousness, he could not do better than read, say, the account of St. Vincent's friendship with Saint-Cyran, or of the relations between the saint and the *Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement*. For further assurance, there is M. Coste's preface. 'Pour rester dans la voie du vrai,' he writes, 'nous n'aurons pas de guide plus sûr que saint Vincent de Paul lui-même.' This was written of the biography, but it might be read in two ways.

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PICTANTIAE

The sweet-scented blossom of an English Spring.—Advert. of *News of the World* in S. African Annual.

Thomism. Theological doctrine of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) who maintained predestination and efficacious grace, and denied the immaculate conception.—*Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

In spite of its renowned antiquity, Merton has not remained in the barbaric throes of mediævalism. Last summer the College authorities sanctioned Sunday tennis on the College ground. —*Sunday Times*.