

Comment

Obviously nothing can be so important to a Christian as sanctity. If a man is not concerned with holiness he cannot intelligibly claim to be a Christian at all. This being so, it is remarkable how little the topic is taken seriously in the Church.

It is not just that we frequently fail to be holy; that has been the common lot of Christians since the early Church decided that she was not a sect of the righteous and published the parable of the tares and the wheat. It is a matter of taking a philistine attitude to holiness. Holiness tends to be treated like the 'softer emotions' in some horrible Public School or saloon bar. People shy away from it as though it were embarrassing or at least too intimate a matter to be discussed.

It is one of the most welcome developments in the western Church in recent years that people have lost some of these taboos in the matter of prayer, but, except in a very profound sense, prayer is not the same as sanctity, and here we remain undeveloped. You can still hear such nonsensical things as that sanctity 'can be known only to God'—nonsensical because if this were so we should have no meaning for the word, no criteria for its use.

Of course sanctity is not a straightforward matter: it is not as easy to say whether a man is a saint as to say whether he is a good engineer, but then being a good poet is not a straightforward matter either. Of course there are no adequate techniques for becoming or for judging a saint, but there are no adequate techniques for becoming or judging a poet. Both involve a good deal of hard work and discipline and response to a tradition, but neither simply results from this; grace or something corresponding to grace is involved in each case. Why then have we not seen, in *New Blackfriars* or elsewhere, a critical study of holiness comparable in seriousness to, say, the study of Ted Hughes by Stan Smith in this issue or of Robert Lowell by Alan Wall last month? Since the Bollandists there have been competent historical studies and in our own time some outstanding biographies, but these do not amount to hagiography as a discipline that can be taken as seriously as literary criticism must be taken today.

It is surely a ridiculous idea that sanctity can only be discussed amongst a coterie of devout Christians or other religious people. If sanctity is as important as Christians have to believe it is, then it must be a human phenomenon visible and of interest to atheists in America or agnostics in Britain as well as to Christians in Russia or Roscommon. To explore the inner mystery of holiness requires faith, but it cannot be totally meaningless and invisible without it. You would expect Christians to have a more sensitive and nuanced approach to sanctity, to have a

critical account that could not be provided by others, but this is precisely what Christians have failed to provide. We have still not moved very far from those Second Nocturne Lessons of the breviary in which the century in which the saint lived was not worth a mention and, apart from being born of either noble or poor but honest parents, he had no social context at all—his sanctity frequently being first manifested in his refusal of his mother's milk on Fridays.

The notion that the paradigm case of sanctity is the outstanding individual is itself one of the first we should have to criticise in establishing a serious hagiography. It is altogether more in accordance with a sound theological tradition to see sanctity as in the first place a matter of the indwelling of the Spirit in Christ and then as the presence of the Spirit in the Church ('the saints who are at Ephesus' etc.). It seems probable that the obsession with the individual is related to the individualism of the bourgeois era in which also sanctity has become privatised and increasingly withdrawn from the public world. (There were, of course, vast numbers of saints in medieval times, but they very frequently represented not so much themselves as the towns or religious orders or other institutions to which they belonged.) The curious practice of canonisation belongs to the same era, the decree of Urban VIII (1634) had the effect not only of strengthening the centralised control of liturgical life but also of reinforcing the individualist view of sanctity; it does not promote any real exploration of the meaning of holiness. Canonisation bears much the same relation to genuine hagiography as the list of set books for a literature exam bears to literary criticism. Certainly hagiography would involve paying critical attention to Martin de Porres or Thomas More (as it might be to Milton or Joyce) but we should not be misled into taking as our starting point the rules of thumb (miracles etc.) by which candidates for canonisation are accepted. To do so would be to take as norm the model of the saint an individual demi-god resident in heaven. A more promising starting point would be to ask how the heavenly, otherworldly character of the holy impinges on our history, how the life of the individual or Church at a particular epoch brings the future to bear on the present, criticising the ideology and reality of the age. We should have to move from a non-historical essentialist account of sanctity in terms of private transactions with the eternal to a historical materialist account in terms of the quality of challenge that the holy makes to the current meaning of being human, the way in which it reveals significance that cannot be accommodated within the accepted values of the contemporary world or, in the end, of any conceivable world. If we begin here with the idea of holiness as the poetry of living, we can begin to treat it seriously.

H. McC.