

SAINTS ANCIENT AND MODERN

ENGLISH Catholics are sometimes charged with indifference to the English saints, with looking to Lisieux instead of Rochester or London or Canterbury. It is not my purpose to argue the truth of this complaint; indeed I propose to take it for granted. Certainly there are C.T.S. tract cases where Ste. Therèse sells much better than Blessed Thomas More. And there is a sense in which no one has any right to grumble. A saint is a saint; the better Englishman for being so, but not the better saint for being English. The terms of reference, so to say, are not national, and there are considerable disadvantages about nationalism in hagiology. The elements of sanctity are the same everywhere. Still, it is also true that these elements are expressed differently, take on a different colouring, according to the natural circumstances of the person who manifests them. Grace builds upon nature, and though the saint is no more a saint for being English, yet he need be no less English for being a saint. Hence it is that we rightly find something congenial in saints of our own nation; hence, too, that our own saints are not ignored without loss. The essentials of sanctity are the same in all the saints, but in so stupendous a success everything is of interest. This man, this woman, succeeded in the only success that is really worth having. We watch their actions and ways in the hope of surprising their secret, and inevitably we want to imitate, so far as we can; to emulate, not only in the very heart of the thing, but in methods, habits, practices, whereby that heart was expressed and confirmed. It is natural, though notoriously not always very sensible, to do this. For though the saint is no holier for being English, it is certain that the Englishman becomes no saintlier for being imitation-Italian or French, for a brave, if unwise, effort to suppress the national characteristics with which, whether he likes it or not, he has to work. Unfortunately

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it is just the externals that are most easily imitable, and just the externals that should most rarely be imitated. One great gain in devotion to our English saints lies there, that in them sanctity was fashioned out of much the materials that we too have to use.

Actually, we all more or less go on this principle. Our affection for saints who were once notorious sinners is not really due to a mean desire to 'debunk' them; it comes from the feeling that they faced difficulties that we also have to face. And so on. But if this is true, how comes it that we are—if we are—deserting men of the same stuff as ourselves in favour of French nuns or Italian students?

One answer is, of course, that it is sheer sentimentalism. We are supposed to be victims of a sugary modern tradition, which is turning us from an earlier, more virile, code. There may be something in this, but it seems worth while to ask whether there is not another reason which is often overlooked. If congeniality rightly plays a part in our devotion to particular saints, then we must take account of congeniality of time. If a saint has special appeal to us because he shared our natural characteristics or dominant temptations, may he not have special appeal because he shared the particular circumstances of our age? In other words, do people prefer foreign saints to English, or is it rather that they find modern saints more congenial than those of past times?

As with nationality, so with time. It is very easy to feel that our own days are quite different—for better or worse—from all others. There are people who say that the Christian life is harder to live nowadays than at some other period in history. It may be so; but there never was a time when the Christian life was easy. There have been few times when some part of the Church was not being persecuted; there have never been any times when there were no strains and stresses. Our age is sometimes spoken of as if it was almost impossible to keep the Christian code in it, and we get the impression that in some other century—it tends to vary with the writer—things were not so difficult. But

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human nature was much the same then; the seven deadly sins were not the product of a machine age, and you can find them all, and Christians falling into them all, whatever page of history you turn. Yet here again the form difficulty or temptation takes has changed. Avarice is not peculiar to the capitalist system, but the system has not always prevailed. Lust took its toll of the faithful long before modern commercialized mass-suggestion, but the cinema is a new thing. Worldliness did its damage amongst the pilgrims to Canterbury, but its pressure is felt now in new ways.—In consequence, the saints of earlier days seem to us to have been spared the strains we know. 'Nous avons tous assez de force pour supporter les maux d'autrui,' and their temptations strike us as being less subtle and more manageable. We picture their age as lacking the difficulties peculiar to our own, and we have not the historical imagination to supply the stresses under which they fought. It all seems easier. But the modern saint knows what we mean, and faced just the troubles and circumstances that we have to face. The world, the flesh, and the devil, are as old as the hills—true! But industrialism, the Stock Exchange, wireless, the cinema, flying—all these bring new clothes to old enemies, and it is in that costume that we have come to know them. How simple were those pastoral days when the only disguise in the wolf's wardrobe was a sheepskin! We forget that temptation is, of its very nature, always adapted to the tempted. And so we run with relief to modern saints, who themselves experienced what life is like now.

And if the saints of other times would not understand our conditions, neither do we understand theirs. People who spend much of their lives amongst books do not easily realize how hard it is for the great majority of Catholics to 'get,' to realize, Blessed Thomas More, let alone St. Dunstan or St. Thomas of Canterbury. Monks, yes; for their form of life has changed but little. But the 'active' lives that mean so much in example and inspiration are so utterly remote in their circumstances. There are, it is true,

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imaginative reconstructions of the lives of the saints, good biographies, stories, and the like, but even so, do they not remain a 'story'? Even to people who feel the charm of the past, is not that very charm partly due to the 'escape' from the present? And is it wholly good, if it leads to a hankering after lost conditions of Christian life? The modern saint says, in effect, 'Here, now, to-day, in these conditions, with all the noise of machinery and all the complex organization of modern life, the thing is possible, as possible as ever.' This time-element counts for more than nationality, particularly nowadays when a good deal of Europe is much of a piece. English people cannot entirely appreciate the circumstances of a middle-class girl in a French provincial town; but she is nearer than St. Etheldreda.

It should not be difficult to test the truth of these contentions. If the point is, not that English people are falling into an exotic pietism, but that we all find the modern saints more sympathetic than the ancient, then we shall find that Ste. Therèse, for example, attracts more devotion in France too than earlier French saints. And it could also be tested by the attitude of English people to modern saints of their own nation. There have lately been signs that they would be by no means unenthusiastic. But for one reason or another occasions for that enthusiasm have been wanting. We have had no lack of good, and even saintly, men and women in modern English Catholicism; but that something extra which goes to the making of a saint of popular appeal was not given us in the nineteenth century. That gift will not always be withheld, and when it comes, we shall see.

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