

Dream of Sanctity

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If we want to understand how Christian belief unfolds in the life of a Christian, it is simplest to seek the answer from the saints.

Sanctity is not easily defined. The Dictionnaire de la Théologie devotes columns to it and leaves us where we started. It is most easily understood by the life of a saint.

At this point, I had meant to illustrate by the life of Edith Stein (1897-1942) who is neither a canonized saint nor likely to be. When I started to write a brief summary, it became clear that it would take at least 10 pages. Instead, I am sending you two little books which you can read if you are interested. The pamphlet is rather special pleading intended for those who already know something of Edith Stein. However, it contains some quotations which express the character of this remarkable woman.

Whether or not you read them, the following quotation is apposite:

Dans la rencontre d'un saint, ce n'est pas un idéal en nous déjà formé que nous trouvons enfin réalisé, vécu. Ce n'est pas la perfection du type humain — ou surhumain — enfin incarnée dans un homme. La merveille est d'un autre ordre. C'est une vie nouvelle, c'est une sphère d'existence nouvelle, avec des profondeurs non seulement insoupçonnées, mais aux résonances étranges, qui soudain nous est révélée. C'est comme une « patrie » nouvelle, d'abord ignorée de nous, mais perçue aussitôt comme plus ancienne et plus vraie, qui sollicite notre cœur.

The Dream of Sanctity for Ordinary Men and Women.

Ten years ago, I should not have included this section on the benedictine life. The recent emphasis on ecology and conservation makes the benedictine ideal - perhaps in some newer form - relevant to our times. I think I can safely say that it is rare in our day that ordinary men and women enjoy their work. In some monasteries, at least, work is enjoyed.

A modern historian has said of St. Benedict that he would be convicted of plagiarism if he lived in modern times. The rule of St. Benedict is most probably adapted from an earlier rule and his genius is mainly in his ability to adapt and to understand what ordinary men and women are capable of. It probably never occurred to him that the rule would bear his name.

His aim was to form a Schola Servitii Dominici (école du service du Seigneur) which would suit the ordinary man: not in the sense that all ordinary men would wish to enter his school, but in the sense that no special talents were required, that he could find his happiness there.

The life of a benedictine was and is the singing of the office (they work through the 150 psalms in about two weeks), work (manual and intellectual) and reading (mainly spiritual reading). If you allow for the fact that there are no holidays (except feast-days), the monk works as long hours as the rest of us.

The benedictine rule has been followed by a host of men and women from the 5th century to our day. It has been deformed

and reformed many times but it remains as a supreme example of an ordered and balanced existence.

No great austerity is required of a monk. Simply that austerity which a man willingly embraces to avoid distraction when in pursuit of a higher goal. Much less than the austerity of a Taine or Einstein.

The achievement of the benedictine life can be gauged by its fruits - I need not go into the history. In every age, it has produced some outstanding scholars, relatively few. Bede of Yarrow with whom you are probably familiar is a good example of the ordinary benedictine. He entered the monastery at 7 and died at 62 and in that interval he practically never left it. He was not particularly original; but by painstaking work over fifty-odd years he produced a substantial corpus of useful writing. He stayed working until the very end; no one is ever put on a shelf at the monasteries.

If you were to ask me what good are monks except to themselves, I should reply:

- i) The question implies an opposition between contemplation and action; they are complementary and both are necessary;
- ii) It is not trivial that a small number of people (perhaps 100,000 men and women) in generation after generation find their happiness in the round of ordinary tasks and within the confines of the monastery; it is not trivial that the experience of the psalms (and more generally of the Bible) becomes part of their bone and marrow;

- iii) The influence of monasteries is real but imperceptible; they are like lighthouses, useless to men comfortably on shore but invaluable to men at sea.
- iv) The following quotation affirms indirectly the need for Christian witness to the primacy of God. (The context is that the writer - Heinrich Schlier - is speaking of our tendency to collective giving):

Bien entendu, celle-ci est un devoir, elle aussi, mais elle peut aussi être une fuite... Il est effrayant de voir comment on néglige le prochain, le Lazare, non seulement celui qui est devant la porte, mais aussi celui qui est dans la maison. Avec l'amour pour « l'homme » ou « les hommes », qui me dérangent et me requièrent beaucoup moins que le prochain, l'amour au sens chrétien perd le caractère concret qui appartient à son essence. — Si l'amour pour Dieu est absorbé dans l'amour pour le prochain, et l'amour pour le prochain exténué en amour pour « l'homme », il n'est pas étonnant que le souci principal de l'Église et du christianisme tende peu à peu mais déjà visiblement, à chercher comment satisfaire les hommes et procurer leur bien-être. C'est là aussi une tâche qui a son lieu et son temps. Mais ce

n'est pas la vraie réponse à l'amour de Dieu. Et le danger est déjà perceptible : la décision de Dieu, ainsi que la hauteur et la profondeur du monde dévoilées par elle, tombent dans l'oubli, et l'homme alors se recroqueville pour ainsi dire, parce que le chrétien est sans doute maintenant ouvert au monde, mais le monde ne découvre plus en lui et par lui que l'obscurité de son être propre. Ce n'est pas en vain que saint Paul a dit : « Que votre charité ne soit pas feinte ¹. »