

# THE THEOLOGY OF CANONIZATION

ONE OF THE most deeply moving sentences ever written is the one with which Augustine opens his autobiography, his *Confessions*: 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts will never find rest until they come to rest in you'. It is a sentiment whose appeal breaks the bonds of time and space, fanning into flame, if only for a brief moment, that spark of divine life buried in the consciousness of men and women of all sorts and conditions, attesting to the historic truth of revelation that humankind is fashioned according to God's own image and likeness: so that, inevitably, consciously or unconsciously, human hands reach out towards the divine goodness and beauty, expressing a longing for an ever greater fulness of life.

This feeling for God, the first answer to the cry of the faithful to be filled with the Holy Spirit, despite their frailty and fickleness, finds a most satisfying liturgical expression in one of the new Eucharistic prayers:

You formed man in your own likeness, and . . . even when he abandoned you and lost your friendship, you did not abandon him to the power of death, but you enabled those who seek you to find you. So many times you proffered your covenant to men, and through the prophets taught them to have hope in your salvation. You loved the world so much that, when the fulness of time had come, you sent your only Son to be our Saviour. He it is who has become man through the action of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin. He has shared our human condition in every respect, apart from sin.

So it is that God has appeared among humankind: Jesus Christ who, in his ordinary comings and goings through the towns and villages of his country, was always bent on doing good, entrancing and winning the hearts of the people amongst whom he lived by the very grace of his presence. Whenever in our prayer we ruminate over the gospel narratives or pause to reflect with greater concentration on his meetings with various people, we find our own hearts burning within us as we glimpse the quality of his love and compassion for them, and the firm friendship springing up between himself and those who opened their hearts to him.

Martha, Mary, Zacchaeus, Simon Peter and so many others: gospel figures such as these enable us to realize what he must have meant to those who saw him with their eyes and touched him with their hands. Peter's 'Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life' (Jn 6, 68); Thomas's 'My Lord and my God' (Jn 20, 28); Mary's 'Rabboni — Master!' (Jn 20, 16). Such expressions are eloquent enough of the human longing to meet and dwell with the living God: a God who at the last has come so close to us as to dwell amongst us.

The desire to find in God one's resting-place, as Augustine expressed it, has deepened and intensified because God's very Son is 'born of a woman, born under the Law, to ransom those imprisoned in the law, so that we might become his children in very deed'. And that we are truly his children 'is proven by the fact that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, who cries, Abba — Father' (Gal 4, 4-6). First, then, the creature recognizes the One who has fashioned him by this longing to find his peace in God; and this same creature, in meeting with this God, now become man, experiences the need to live in his presence; then, when he recognizes that God has ransomed him, he longs to be released from his bodily existence in order to be with Christ (Phil 1, 23); and finally to find his very being, with the Son, in the Father. It is for this that Jesus himself has prayed: 'Father, it is my desire that those whom you have given to me might be with me there where I am, in order that they might take their fill of my glory which is your gift to me, in the love with which you loved me before the world was ever made' (Jn 17, 24).

But Christ, as the first born of so many brothers and sisters dying and rising again for our salvation, is now ascended to the Father. He is no longer to be found walking our streets and pathways; nor, in spite of his Eucharistic presence amongst us, can we look upon him with our bodily eyes. At the same time, he has given us his Spirit — sent by the Father — so that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him. As members of his Body, the Church, we are made one with him; because he quickens us with his own Spirit, we share his very life. This means that he is alive, not simply in his own individual human nature and as eternal Son of the Father, but that, by communicating his Spirit to all those who are freely receptive of this gift of himself and as freely hand over themselves as gift to him, he can and does live in each one of those members of his Mystical body. That is to say, there are innumerable ways of living out a human life, a whole host of human possibilities and experiences

which are closed off to each human individual, by the very fact of being an individual. Even though Christ was the eternal word of God, he 'emptied himself' for love of us: he accepted this essential human condition of being limited to what was possible for a single human being. However, 'though he was crucified in weakness, he now lives according to the power of God' (2 Cor 13, 4); so that he can and does communicate his own life, precisely as Son: thus making it possible to live out — in those who freely respond to him and become his fellow-workers — those human experiences and that spiritual potential of which he had deprived himself by accepting to live a limited human life.

So Paul expresses the grandeur of christian existence and call, in his consciousness of its realization in himself:

I have been crucified with Christ; the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me; and my present human life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and sacrificed himself for me (Gal 2, 20).

Nor is the Apostle alone. Every age, every environment has seen and still sees countless Christians who have, like him, 'clothed themselves in Christ' (Gal 3, 27; Eph 4, 24), surrendering themselves unconditionally to the graces of his Spirit and responding spontaneously to the divine proffer. It is these people who are justly called 'saints'. As the Council has noted:

There are men and women amongst us who are transformed into the likeness of Christ in a more perfect way. In their living, God reveals to the rest of us the vivid truth of his presence. He speaks to us in them, and gives us the pledge of his Kingdom (*Lumen Gentium*, 50).

These brief reflections on the nature of the union between Christ and his followers may help us to understand how the redemptive work of Christ is extended and completed in those who allow themselves to be animated and directed in everything by Christ's Spirit. They do indeed share his life. His salvation takes on a visible and concrete form in their particular environment, in the world in which they live and move. They make it possible for Christ to live his life in them, to reveal himself in their own limited but unique personalities, and according to the gifts and qualities bestowed on them. Everyone who takes on his life and love to this extent radiates his compassion and the power of his attractiveness in their own

particular circumstances; so that they draw others to him by the entrancing qualities of his goodness flowing out of them. So it is that Christ the head, through the living example of those who give themselves to him without reserve, continues to create and reveal, across time and space, new and authentic ways of living the christian life; so that even though our world is ever subject to change, the christian ideal of union and identification with Christ is found to be a constant and practical endeavour.

Furthermore, these people are as human as ourselves in their limitations, their characters, their genius, their capabilities and gifts, their learning and culture. They inhabit the same world as we do, children of the same times, the same human predicament. The difference is that they live in such close contact with him as to be wholly taken up with him, moved and directed by his Spirit. When we come into contact with such people, we experience a lively sense of presence — of the God who has turned their lives upside down by the force of his love.

We are not speaking of sensational wonder-workers, even though it should be no cause for surprise if people in whom God is acting should produce such marvels. Nor are we thinking of those who manifest the various extraordinary phenomena of mysticism, though these too are 'ordinary' in the context of the infinite power of God. It is not even a question of those who set up for themselves detailed codes of moral practice, even if there is a much more profound interior law inscribed on their hearts. We are simply speaking of people who overcome the world, or better, of those in whom Christ has overcome and now is master of the world. They are the ones whose labours encompass the whole of sorrowing humanity (Rom 8, 22-23). They are the suffering ones who carry the scars of the battle between light and darkness; and yet, straitened as they are on all sides, they live in a peaceful contentment. In union with him who was reviled, condemned and crucified yet who is risen and gives life to the world, they are full of joy because 'it is enough for the disciple to be like the master' (Mt 10, 25). They find security in their humble ability to be weak and poverty-stricken, 'for my strength finds its full scope in your weakness' (2 Cor 12, 9). They have abandoned themselves wholly to him who recommends that they are not to be anxious how or what they are to answer, 'for the Holy Spirit will teach you at the right time what you ought to say' (Lk 12, 12). Because all their surety is in him, they can live from moment to moment in the knowledge that they 'can achieve all in the One who

strengthens them' (Phil 4, 13). The reality Jesus describes, 'Abide in me and I in you' (Jn 15, 5), is integral to their lived experience, as it was for Paul.

The history of the Church teaches us that there are such men and women in every age and region and every walk of life — and not simply in times of persecution when circumstances provide the opportunity for giving the supreme witness of their love in martyrdom. Certainly the inexhaustible riches of Christ's friendship and of union with him shines out more radiantly in the martyrs. This will always be so, since 'the Church will never lack the trials of persecution' (*Lumen Gentium*, 42). At the same time the same unconditional surrender of the self to Christ and this steadfast union with him is equally experienced by a great many in less dramatic ways which are none the less real for that. Its reality is to be found in the daily offering of love, so often hidden from human eyes, which forms the bond of affection with the Father's Son for the well-being of the neighbour.

These, then, are the saints. Christ lives and works in them, not simply in order to establish that intimacy of relationship which delights him so much, but also to prolong in them his mission, his labours and the abundance of his gifts. Having overcome the world by freely accepting death so that they might have life, he now lives in his disciples, vine and branches together, pruned by the Father that life may abound and bear fruit. His sufferings are brought to completion in them for the good of his body, the Church (Col 1, 24); and thus he continues to redeem the world in accord with that mystery of love made manifest in the cross.

In the saints he makes himself known to us experientially. Some of them emerge in times of crisis to fulfil a particular mission in the Church as his chosen instruments. More often, however, he reveals himself in humble tasks and circumstances, 'the frightening monotony of everyday', where nothing remarkable appears to be happening — except the ineffable steadfastness of total self-giving. Yet it is from such that the Church draws her vitality. Here is the eminent holiness of so many thousands of her children: the response to his invitation to abandon themselves completely to the fashioning and refashioning of his Spirit.

It follows, then, that the Church needs to be more aware of the Divine economy in this regard. It must be her care to present to the faithful, whenever the opportunity occurs, those men and women who in God's providence have a special significance for modern

man. From the theological point of view, we can begin from the observations already made concerning Jesus's own impact on the people who were won over to him. They saw in him the divine reflection — 'he who sees me, sees the Father' (Jn 14, 9). People sought him out, turned to him because of his gentleness, his humility, his unreserved love; and, in their affection for him, they themselves grew in goodness. 'Learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly of heart' (Mt 11, 29).

It is this same attractiveness which continues to be exercised through the saints: people in whom God's own goodness is transparent, and whose intimate relationship with Jesus provides motivation to lead a more authentic christian life. We have all of us experienced the presence in our midst of genuinely good people: how their example speaks to us simply and directly of the Lord, and awakens us out of our meanness and mediocrity, so that we are moved in various ways to act like them, and genuinely to seek their advice and help. It also happens that among the many good folk we meet in the course of our lives, there are some few who make a lasting impression on their contemporaries; not only on those who happen to meet them and get to know them personally, but in others who hear at second hand of their power for doing good. Interest in and esteem for them grows because of their obviously Christ-like qualities. And so a reputation for holiness grows up around them and people seek the help of their prayers.

To express these facts theologically, what we have here is a revelation of God's way of working through the personality and the example of one of his children. One realizes further how he indicates more explicitly that such a person, who now enjoys the vision of the blessed, continues to share the divine bounty. Some of God's faithful moved by grace are specially attracted by the virtues and heroism of the person's life, and in their veneration experience a profound desire to follow that particular way to holiness to the point at which they feel it right to ask his or her help to walk the same path. Granted that such a movement proves to be genuine, one must say that it is clearly within the providence of God and through his grace that the saint continues to fulfil this function in the lives of the faithful. It must be noticed as well that, when the faithful are moved to seek to know God's specially gifted ones and to experience the benefits of their intercession, it is hardly out of curiosity, much less superstition. We are speaking of a kind of knowledge very like to that involved in a living act of faith in Christ. For, like him, the saint

is not a historical personality belonging to the past: he or she is vitally present to us when we contemplate, in the strict sense of the word, with the interior sight conferred by faith, hope and love. As with any other movement towards the person of Christ 'in whom the Father is', it is a question of being moved by his Spirit; and the signs of this movement is that authentic perception of the attraction the saints exercise in leading people to seek them out. Again, we may observe that faith is at work, simply because the faithful take it for granted that the saints are their true and living friends: and indeed larger than the mortal life which they have left behind. As the Council has said:

It is not merely in virtue of their example that we cherish the memory of the saints; it is because of our common existence in love, as their brothers and sisters, in order that the union of the whole Church may be strengthened in the Spirit of God (Eph 4, 1-6). For just as christian companionship here on pilgrimage brings us closer to Christ, so it is when we share our lives with the saints. We are brought into the living presence of the One who is the Fountainhead of the grace and life of the whole people of God. It is, therefore, highly appropriate for us to embrace in the loving bonds of friendship these brothers and sisters of ours who are also especially good to us, and to give proper thanks to God for them. Let us turn to them in our needs, relying on their prayers and strengthening aid. For on our behalf they turn to our God through his Son Christ Jesus our Lord, who alone is our Redeemer and Saviour . . . the crown of all the Saints (*Lumen Gentium*, 50).

The Church, and in particular its hierarchy, as it witnesses a devotion which finds its origin in the action of God in men's hearts and its expression in the genuine understanding of the faithful, cannot stand on the sidelines. It must provide the necessary means to discern whether there is a solid foundation for the appearances of a widespread 'reputation for holiness', and whether in fact the person carrying this special esteem among the faithful did indeed give his life for Christ's love in martyrdom, or manifested that heroism of life which is the stuff of the saints.

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