

A GOODLY COMPANY

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WITH the eighty years of the life of Saint Philip Neri as a kind of pivot, the Saints of the sixteenth century—and Robert Bellarmine, one of their number, called it “century of the Saints”¹—may be divided into three groups. First there are those who at some time or other came into personal contact with Philip.² Then there are those who may be called his second-hand friends. Finally looms up that large number of saintly men and women who have become acquainted with the grand old man in the heavenly mansions and during “the eternal years.”

Cutting across these divisions and similar to them in that it includes only those who lived some space of their early lives during Philip’s own is “the first legion” of the Society of Jesus and their friends and associates among the spiritual aristocracy of Europe.

In addition to Philip Neri, Saint Ignatius Loyola had the good fortune to be associated with three Saints during the course of his life. As may be imagined, they were his followers and their names, together with his own, are writ large in the history of the self-reforming Church. They were the two Francises, Xavier and Borgia, and Peter Canisius.

When, in 1541, Ignatius Loyola said to Francis Xavier: “Go and set all on fire,”³ he bade farewell to a friend upon whom he would never again lay his eyes. At the same time he intensified the ardor of a friendship which would never end. Until 1552, when Xavier’s hand was stilled in lonely death on Sancian island, letters, like so many “bridges across the rivers of distance,”⁴ passed between Rome and wherever his intense zeal might find the great missionary. Thus Ignatius could write: “I shall never

¹ Cf. Johnson, George, Jerome D. Hannan and Sr. M. Dominica, *The Story of the Church* (New York, 1935). p. 348.

² Cf. “Roman Holy Day,” *DOMINICANA*, vol. xxii, no. 3 (Sept. 1937). pp. 221-229.

³ Cf. Yeo, Margaret, *Saint Francis Xavier* (New York), p. 309.

⁴ Cf. Nesbitt, Marian, *The Saints and Friendship* (Dublin, 1932), p. 40.

forget you, Entirely your own, Ignatius"⁵ and Francis could end his last letter with: "The least of your sons and the farthest removed from your presence, Francisco de Xavier."⁶ Close knit by the bonds of holy friendship, they were together elevated to the honors of sainthood by Pope Gregory XV on May 22, 1622.⁷

There is a certain type of incident which, because of its many implications, is especially dear to the hearts of enterprising writers of books. Such an incident was the first meeting of Ignatius Loyola and Francis Borgia. It was in the Spring of 1528 and Francis, then the young Duke of Gandia, was on his way to the Imperial Court at Valladolid. But at Alcala de Henares he reined in his horse, his gaze arrested by a look from the eyes of a wretched prisoner of the Inquisition. That prisoner's name was Inigo and he left his paternal home at Loyola to become a Saint.⁸

In 1556 Francis, writing of the death of that same Ignatius, said: "You can well believe the loneliness and unhappiness that I have felt, humanly speaking, when I think of us, his children, left here in the desert while he, our father, is joyfully gathering the harvest which he sowed with such continual tears."⁹ During the years between, the tables had literally been turned and to the eternal advantage of both men. The Duke of Grandia had gotten down from his horse to become a fool for Christ's sake while Ignatius had become a friend to Popes and kings. In Borgia he had another Francis to take the place of Xavier and when he died in 1556 he knew, according to a popular tradition,¹⁰ that this man would one day become General of the Order which he had founded.

It was the well-beloved Blessed Peter Faber who served as connecting link between Ignatius Loyola and Peter Canisius. One of the original seven and first priest of the Society, he had been sent to troubled Germany by Loyola. There he gave *The Spiritual Exercises* to Peter Canisius who was admitted to the

⁵ Goodier, Alban, S.J., *Saints for Sinners* (New York, 1934), p. 88.

⁶ Cf. Yeo, Margaret, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

⁷ Astrain, Antonio, S.J., "Saint Francis Xavier," in *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. vi, p. 234; Pollen, J. H., S.J., "Saint Ignatius Loyola," in *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. vii, p. 643.

⁸ Yeo, Margaret, *The Greatest of the Borgias* (New York, 1936), pp. 44-45. Cf., among others, Walsh, William Thomas, *Philip II* (New York, 1937), pp. 25-26.

⁹ Yeo, Margaret, *The Greatest of the Borgias*, p. 238.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

Order on May 8, 1543.¹¹ Four years later the latter arrived in Rome. There he embraced for the first time Saint Ignatius Loyola who, says Father Brodrick, "outside times of prayer . . . set him for the good of his soul, to scrub pots and pans, wash the floor, help the cook and make himself generally useful as a domestic."¹² On September 7, 1549, and in the presence of Ignatius, Peter made profession of solemn vows.¹³

In a passage of singular beauty and insight Willa Cather has set down a homely truth which is not without a deep implication in the life of the Church and of those who serve Her. Miss Cather says:

The many naked little sandbars which lie between Venice and the mainland, in the seemingly stagnant waters of lagoons are made habitable and wholesome only because, every night, a foot and a half of the tide creeps in from the sea and winds its fresh brine up through all that network of shining waterways. So, into all the little settlements of quiet people, tidings of what their boys and girls are doing in the world bring refreshment; bring to the old, memories, and to the young, dreams.¹⁴

Off by himself and away from all whom he loved, Francis Xavier must have become, with the passing of the years, an almost legendary and heroic figure to his brethren in Rome. Their only contact with him and his with them was by letter. Although he had met neither Francis Borgia nor Peter Canisius he cannot long have remained ignorant of them for there was Ignatius in Rome to write of the one and Faber in Germany to write of the other. News of all his brethren and of what they were accomplishing for Christ in a changing world was precious to the often lonely Saint: "How great a consolation! I read and re-read them (letters from Loyola, Faber and Broët, 1543 and 1544) and seem to be still with you, my beloved brothers, if not in body at least in spirit."¹⁵ His letters, too, from far-off places with unfamiliar names "brought to the old, memories, and, to the young, dreams":

¹¹ Braunsberger, Otto, S.J., "Saint Peter Canisius," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. xi, p. 757.

¹² Brodrick, James, S.J., *Saint Peter Canisius* (London, 1935), p. 105.

¹³ Braunsberger, Otto, S.J., *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ Cather, Willa, *Song of the Lark* (New York, 1915), p. 490. Quotation is made with permission of the publishers, Houghton, Mifflin Company.

¹⁵ Cf. Yeo, Margaret, *Saint Francis Xavier*, pp. 161-162.

The fatigues of working among intelligent people, anxious to learn in what religion they would best save their souls, bring with them immense satisfaction. . . . The number of people who came to question and discuss was such that I can truly say that never in my life had I so much spiritual joy and consolation. . . . I end without being able to end, for I am writing to my fathers and brothers whom I love so much. More, because I write about the Christians of Japan who are so very dear to me.¹⁶

Besides Ignatius of Loyola and Philip Neri, Saint Francis Borgia became acquainted during his years as a Jesuit with six persons who have since become Saints. They are: Theresa of Avila, Pius V, Charles Borromeo, Robert Bellarmine, Peter Canisius and Stanislaus Kostka.

The sanctity of Theresa of Avila was as much a part of Spain as that of Philip Neri was of his beloved Rome. Thus it was that when Francis Borgia met her, it was in his own native land and in her native city of Avila. It was in 1557, while he was Commissary General for Spain, Portugal and the Indies, that Francis made what might well be called a "professional" visit to the celebrated reformer and mystic. The most practical of women, Theresa wished some advice upon what to her was the most practical of subjects—the spiritual life. That she was not disappointed seems clear from what she herself has said: "He gave both medicine and advice, as one who had made great progress himself; for experience is very important in these matters."¹⁷

The Congregation which, on July 2, 1565, elected Francis Borgia third General of the Jesuits was composed of thirty-nine Fathers. One of their number was Peter Canisius.¹⁸ Of the subsequent relations of the two Saints it is interesting to note that, like Saint Paul and Saint Mark, "they did not always see eye to eye,—one keen on local needs, the other with a wider outlook on the work of the Society."¹⁹ Nevertheless, they are among the Blessed in Heaven today just because they could overcome rather than be overcome by such differences. From the nature and extent of the labors which he entrusted to him

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

¹⁷ Saint Theresa of Avila, *The Life of Saint Theresa of Jesus*, trans. by David Lewis (London, 1916), pp. 210-211.

¹⁸ Yeo, Margaret, *The Greatest of the Borgias*, pp. 280-281.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

the General might have said of Peter, even as Paul said of Mark: "he is profitable to me for the ministry."²⁰ And Canisius, on his side, bears witness in his naïve and humble letters to the kindness and consideration of Borgia.

In her *Greatest of the Borgias*²¹ Margaret Yeo gives a vivid pen-portrait of Francis and Pius V at the Vatican. "The Pope and the General made a striking picture as they paced to and fro in the Raphael rooms upstairs or in Bramante's great court. The Pope was sixty-eight but the fire and resolution of youth still burned in the frail body emaciated by mortification and in his fierce face, with its keen eyes, long nose and thin lips. The General too was no more than skin and bone, but his great height made him tower above the bowed figure of the old Dominican." As helper and confidant of the Pope, Borgia was entrusted with many and delicate missions, all having for their end the much-needed reform of the Church. But there were two points concerning which Pius ever turned a deaf ear to the arguments and petitions of Francis. Although modern and forward-looking, the Pope was yet a Dominican and a member of the old school to the extent of requiring choral recitation of the Divine Office by the Society. Nor would he permit a Jesuit to be ordained until after he had made profession of final vows. It was only after Pius's death and during the Pontificate of Gregory XIII that the Society was released from these obligations.²²

A name which cannot easily be dissociated from those of Pius V and Francis Borgia is that of Charles Borromeo. As Cardinal Archbishop of Milan and the holder of many other high ecclesiastical offices he was associated with them in the work of reform. When he was ordained to the Priesthood in 1563 he celebrated his first private Mass at the same altar at which Francis daily celebrated his and at which Ignatius, too, had offered the Holy Sacrifice.²³

Another Saint of the Society for whom Francis Borgia felt great respect and love was Robert Bellarmine. The latter's name occurs frequently in Borgia's letters and he "more than once asked to be remembered to him *in specie*, or very particularly."²⁴

²⁰ II *Tim.* iv. 11.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 292-293.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 293-294.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

²⁴ Brodrick, James, S.J., *The Life and Work of Blessed Robert Francis Bellarmine, S.J.* (London, 1928), vol. i, p. 55.

In 1567 Borgia received from Peter Canisius at Munich a letter which read in part:

Those who bring you this letter under the guidance of Christ are sent from our Province. . . .

The third person sent is Stanislaus, a young Pole of noble birth, virtuous and devoted to study. Our Fathers at Vienna did not dare to receive him, for fear of provoking his family. He came to me desiring to fulfil a long-cherished project; for, some years ago, he engaged himself entirely to our Society before being admitted into it. In Dilingen, he was tested for a while at the boarding-school and showed himself ever faithful to his duties and constant in his vocation. Meantime, he conceived a desire to be sent to Rome that he might be further removed from his relatives, of whose persecution he was afraid, and that he might make greater progress in piety. He has never lived among our novices, but might be aggregated to them in Rome. We hope for great things from him. . . .²⁵

Thus did Francis Borgia make the acquaintance of Stanislaus Kostka. Like many another religious superior before and after him the General of the Jesuits liked especially to be with the novices.²⁶ And so it was that during the few short months of life which remained to the young Pole, Borgia saw the making of a Saint.

It might be said of Stanislaus Kostka that he ran away from school to become a Saint. The more prosaic truth is that he far outdistanced Master David Copperfield in that enterprising youngster's famous trip from London to Dover. Kostka, aged seventeen, only knew that he wanted to be a Jesuit and could not do so if he remained at school in Vienna where his father's opposition to the project counted for very much. Therefore he decided to leave Austria. Early one morning, August 10, 1567, and fortified by Mass and Holy Communion, he slipped away. "Augsburg and Father Canisius were his objectives, and they lay, as the crow flies, 253 miles away. By the winding roads and paths which he must have taken he probably covered nearly twice that distance."²⁷ A fortnight later he reached Augsburg only to find that Peter was not there. He continued straight on

²⁵ Brodrick, James, S.J., *Saint Peter Canisius*, pp. 674-675.

²⁶ Yeo, Margaret, *The Greatest of the Borgias*, p. 306.

²⁷ Brodrick, James, S.J., *Saint Peter Canisius*, p. 674.

to Dilingen where his hopes were finally realized. Thence and at his own request he was sent to the novitiate at Sant' Andrea in Rome.

While on an official visit to the Eternal City during the following summer Peter Canisius was invited to address the novices. He accepted and spoke to them of how advantageously one might spend a month if he were to make believe that it was to be his last upon earth. "This simple suggestion set Stanislaus on fire. One can hardly describe him except in terms of fire. He did not so much live as burn away before God with sheer longing for the eternal, and so the words of St. Peter rang for him like the bells of Heaven."²⁸ A fortnight later, on the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, he became ill and died.²⁹

Mention has been made of the "Jesuit relations" of Saint Peter Canisius. As writer, reformer and controversialist he likewise had connections with Pius V, "whose election he considered a miracle of God's mercy,"³⁰ and with whom he had interviews concerning the Church in his native land.³¹ Of Peter's associations with Charles Borromeo and Francis de Sales there is very little, but that little is amusing for the light that it throws upon the characters of all three Saints. In 1582 when Borromeo was appointed Visitor and Delegate to Switzerland he wrote to Canisius asking for advice. Later he requested that the Saint join him. Because of the season of the year and the age and infirmity of Peter, the Jesuit Provincial decided otherwise. Nor was Canisius sorry. "I prefer to be out of Cardinal Borromeo's company rather than in it, because I consider him too rigorous a physician for the spiritually weak and delicate Swiss," he told the General, Father Aquaviva.³²

It was in a state of great perplexity about a most perplexing problem that Saint Francis de Sales sat down and wrote a letter to Peter Canisius. Temporarily worsted by a Calvinist over a fine point in the doctrine of free will, Francis consulted his copy of Bellarmine's *Controversies* only to find that that celebrated Doctor had not dealt with that particular difficulty. So the gentle missionary in the Chablais bethought himself of Peter Canisius, "separated only by the Lake of Geneva."³³ From his

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 676.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 675-676

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 639.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 690.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 808.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 809.

words: “. . . I thought I should do something not displeasing to you and of immense future utility to myself if I was to approach you through the post, as I cannot do so in the flesh, for the purpose of putting questions to you from time to time about theological matters and difficulties and of receiving an occasional letter of instruction from you, according to your neighborly charity . . .” one can conclude that this is not the only letter which passed between the two Saints.³⁴

Aloysius Gonzaga was a most fortunate person. Three times during his short life he came under the influence of a saint. He was prepared for his First Holy Communion by Saint Charles Borromeo who also gave him his first taste of the Bread of Life.³⁵ Later, and according to his own testimony, it was the *Shorter Catechism* of Saint Peter Canisius which determined Aloysius to become a Jesuit.³⁶ Finally, it fell to the lot of Saint Robert Bellarmine to prepare the young saint for death. “Near midnight on 20 June, 1591, he (Robert) stood, the picture of sorrow, beside the bed of his young friend.

“‘Tell me, Luigi,’ he whispered, ‘tell me when it is time to say the prayers.’

“‘After a little while the dying Saint looked up at him: ‘Now, Father, it is time,’ and an hour later he was in Heaven.”³⁷

The name of Peter Claver and the institution of Negro slavery are so intimately bound together in the Christian Catholic consciousness that it is almost impossible to conceive of the one without the other. But that is due, in no small measure, to the influence of another man, a Saint in his own right. Alphonsus Rodriguez, lay-brother of the Society of Jesus, was gate-keeper at the College of Montesione in Majorca when Claver came there to study Philosophy. Seventy-two years old, he literally swung open the door to the life-long work of one who would become “a Saint in the slave trade.” It was he who fired the spiritual ambitions of the young novice. And, years later, it was his picture which lightened the solitude of that same novice, grown old and feeble in the service of slaves, as he lay upon his death-bed in far-off Cartagena.³⁸

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 808-809.

³⁵ O'Connor, J. F. X., S.J., ed., *Life of St. Aloysius Gonzaga* (New York, 1891), p. 37.

³⁶ Brodrick, James, S.J., *Saint Peter Canisius*, p. 459.

³⁷ Cf. Brodrick, James, S.J., *The Life and Work of Blessed Robert Francis Bellarmine, S.J.*, col. i, pp. 310-311.

³⁸ Lunn, Arnold, *A Saint in the Slave Trade* (New York, 1935), pp. 48-49, 182.

With Peter Claver and Alphonsus Rodriguez the record of the Jesuit Saints of the sixteenth century and their saintly associates comes to an end. An interesting tale about interesting people, it is an aspect, a sidelight of that yet more wondrous tale of a Spirit Which can never die. Out of the very heart of every age in which "the gates of hell" seemed about to prevail against God's Church there has sprung up a band of men to challenge and to conquer. From different, even from enemy countries they have sometimes come. They have represented the lowest and the highest in the social scale. They have been at a loss to understand each other's speech and national characteristics but always they have shared a common vision, have heard the self-same call to serve. It was so with Saint Benedict when Europe ceased to be Roman and threatened to become barbarian. It was so, later, when Saint Dominic and Saint Francis sallied forth upon the highways and byways of medieval Europe. It was so during the sixteenth century when Saint Ignatius Loyola threw down the gauntlet before the Protestant onslaught. And in every age in that front line of Catholic defense there have been a few who could the better help to renew the life of the Church because they themselves were Saints and enjoyed each other's friendship and encouragement.