

SAINTS AND REALISM

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HERE is little reason for surprise that the character Philonous in Maritain's "Theonas" failed to realize his fond hope for a laboratory diagnosis of the thing we call sanctity. Nor is it to be wondered at that his advertisements in religious sheets and ecclesiastical reviews did not bring a flock of saints applying to be specimens for the purpose of such a diagnosis. However strange such carrying on may appear, the world is far from void of those who are desirous to discover some purely physical basis for the many queer phenomena that characterize hagiography. Philonous admits that the idea of sanctity as proposed by the Church of Rome is quite unintelligible to him, when he hopes that same Church will come to a realization of her error in applauding the many "Mary" types, who apparently leave scarcely an impression on the world. He is, however, in admiration at the many "Marthas" of the Catholic Martyrology. He slaps the Church on the back, so to speak, for her good sense.

The Catholic mind, however, is not in the least perturbed that the Saints are misunderstood. Did not the world misunderstand them when, and perhaps because, they were in the world, but not of it? However, Holy Mother Church does not wonder at such an enigma. We can analyze sanctity and quite in a laboratory fashion. Our laboratory, however, must be equipped with more accurate instruments than the dull knives and needles of a materialistic sort. We must apply reason, keen reason and precisely allied to truth.

To start our experiment let us run hurriedly through a bit of hagiography. We shall choose a specimen at random. But what a diversity of characters, what a variety of interests we find. Indeed we can easily understand how hard it is for one outside the pale of the Church to comprehend the medley,—a Thomas Aquinas and a Bernadette, a Little Flower and a Peter Claver, a Joseph Cupertino and a Thomas More. Let us attempt to discover the common denominator that balances the lives of all the Saints.

Truly it does seem a motley cast of characters. Bernadette, a peasant girl, signs of whose ignorance are to this day exploited at

Lourdes, one seemingly too ignorant to play and who, we are told, found no words when she wished to pray! How can such a one be set up on a pedestal beside the Angelic Doctor? Truly Thomas was called the "dumb ox" of Aquino, but the world did feel his presence. Here was a genius; his tomes are found the world over. And then we have Therese of the Child Jesus, so annoyed and so tried by such a small thing as the nervous jingling of rosary beads by a Sister companion. And she too follows the same Lamb as Peter Claver. Yes, Peter was a slight and little man, but what power he had in the effacement of most hideous and repulsive human misery! Daily he joyously slaved over negroes cancerous and leprous spiritually as well as physically. Finally there is Joseph. Why, here was a man whom the world deemed fit for an asylum. Over and above his sad plight in matters of health and intellect, Joseph was utterly lacking in personality. He knew better than anything else how aggravating such an ass as he was must be. And yet he is coupled with the noble and witty chancellor of England, a man so full of personality that the loss of his good graces brought remorse to so ignoble a thing as the conscience of Henry VIII. And thus we might continue and find many a startling paradox in the lives of the Saints. Yet all are Saints and in their sanctity there is a trace of the unity of God. In the life of each and every one of them there is a holy love and firm conviction of the Truth.

Peering through the many systems of thought that have permeated and now do permeate this world of our's, we little wonder that our Saints are so misunderstood. We realize the glory of our Faith and render thanks to God for it. Because our Faith does not support the peculiar notions of these systems, the use of the terms "progress" and "perfection" becomes wholly unintelligible to us. "Progress" is the big shout; indeed it is a noble cry. That there is need of progress, and constant progress, no sound thinker will deny. But just wherein progress is to be made is the point of contention. Is noble man to stoop so low as to suppose this progress must be a mechanical thing, a constant material increase, a mass augmentation of productivity? Or shall men even be content with an artistic and intellectual progress as an end in itself? Many a contention will be raised, no doubt, in favor of each of these types of progression. The material minded will ask that we take cognizance of the great alleviation of suffering that science has effected. It will be maintained that certain rampant diseases have been wiped out. Suffering, I would be led to believe, will finally be found no more in this vale of tears,—the vale, inci-

dentally, which has required the blood and life of the Master, the Son of God. We are to have the vale without tears, a certain Eden so to speak.

I would ask: Has suffering been lessened in any considerable degree? It is certainly true that some particular physical evils have been dealt with, and nobly so, to the good of the universe; but what of the multiple new afflictions which seem to pop up from nowhere? Is it not true that men meet with new possibilities of suffering with practically every new invention? Then, again, what of the stepping down from higher things that follows upon such a lowering of one's end as to place it in merely the dissolution of suffering? This is really to add suffering to suffering, whereas the Sufferer par excellence offers us "grace for grace."

The degradation resulting from such an aim is well brought out by a certain newspaper article I had the fortune to come upon. As I picked up the morning paper my eye fell upon a picture of a face. Indeed there was more than a tinge of uncomeliness in Mrs. X's face. Naturally I wondered what her claim on fame or notoriety might be. Reading her story I found that she was advertising for almost the miraculous. Mrs. X offered any price to any surgeon who would find it possible to touch up her face. In fact, she went so far as to offer her life should any man have an untried experiment of which he was hopeful,—and all because she felt she could not go on living with such a face. Whether it was a humanitarian move or one resulting from pure pride is beyond my ken. At any rate it was certainly a most irrational proceeding.

The case, indeed, is an extreme one, but we can often grasp things more readily in their exaggeration. I make so bold as to say that reason allows for the assertion that Mrs. X might live on to a happy old age. Her life could be a success and she could even arrive at a comparatively full human stature, in spite of that ugly countenance. There have been Saints whose cross of this particular nature was much heavier than Mrs. X's. Yet these Saints did arrive at their full human stature and supernatural perfection. And how, I would no doubt be asked, was this to be accomplished? I make answer that they acted upon a reasonable Faith. Since we deal with sanctity as it is backed by reason let us give ear to one most competent in both the field of sanctity and the field of reason. Hear the bellowing of the Dumb Ox of Aquino.

In his commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima* the Angelic Doctor says that the knowledge of the soul would seem of great profit to all

the truth taught by the sciences. This statement is not made thoughtlessly. In psychology he sees in a certain sense the key of the sciences, in so far as it treats of the form or soul which renders possible all our knowledge and human movement. If first the existence of the soul and its spirituality and final end are unknown, the possibility of true progress is precluded. Here is a point of departure, the struggle for knowledge of the soul. Here, right at the start, we fear that Mrs. X, a member of a superficial age, has dropped behind us; her scratch is not even skin deep. Had she ever been guilty of some small amount of introspection, her mind might have come upon enough truth for a start. A continuance of such introspection, together with a consideration of the things around her, might suggest to her mind a few such questions as Doctor Behn places in his synthesis of Thomistic Doctrine: "Who, then, does see the whole of timeless truth, in whose presences does order come into being, who does establish the ideas which govern the cosmos?"

In fact, it is from the expansive treatise of our learned Saint, enamoured of knowledge of the soul, that we learn the order of the thing as a thing and in its relation to every other thing. Upon it he built a strong superstructure, a defence for those who least need a defence,—God's Saints. Comparatively few among them were much concerned with "ens ut sic" or fully understood the terms "media" and "finis." Yet their every action was in absolute harmony with these realities. They drank of truth at the spring that was the Faith. They knew that God was loving, that their humility was not a falsehood, that they were living members of the mystical body of Christ, Who said: "I am the Truth." Once the soul was established in all its powers, the Angelic Doctor found it a comparatively easy matter to draw a diagram of its relation to all other things. He proceeded to analyse it in its causes and then to analyse its causes in their mutual relations. Man, he found, was a wondrous creation. Not only did Thomas arrive at the superiority of the soul over the body, but he saw God at the very peak of the hierarchy of being. For St. Thomas, perfection lay in subjection of the soul to God and subjection of man's lower faculties to the soul. He gives a peculiar pre-eminence to the reason, but it must be remembered that it is to the will he gives the pre-eminence in the conduct of a moral life.

Now the nobler faculties of man, reason and will, are agents not of transient, but of immanent action. Hence it is that we spurn the opinions of those who place the whole essence of progress in an external activity that is an end in itself. In its own order, of course,

such progress is a marvelous thing, but for the purpose of developing to full human stature it is purely accidental. It can never bring contentment to any individual or perfection to any group of individuals. That such perfection ever come, progress must be founded firmly upon the noblest of all discursive knowledge, namely upon staunch and tried principles of metaphysics. Such perfection comes not from a constant change, but rather from an augmentation of truth,—which truth is by its very nature adequated to reality. It is above all not a fiction, labeled “truth” by reason of apparent utility to the emotions and whims of the individual. Through metaphysics we become acquainted with the hierarchy of being. From this hierarchy we learn the true order of things. The means are all subordinated to the First Cause, the Alpha and Omega.

Once this relation is firmly established in the minds of men, rule and government take on an entirely new aspect. Man who is bound to a certain perfection, sees the importance of the proper direction of his every act. Nor is he apt to misinterpret St. Paul’s “war of the members,” nor be too much intimidated by it. He knows he is from God. His body is not a thing essentially hostile to the soul. He sees the end of all creation, the harmonizing of all things to the glory of God. Thus he has a foundation for his moral life, which in practice must be in accord with the directions of the Lawgiver, if his final end and highest perfection is to be reached. Discord on the part of the human will is a deflection from the true moral order. Such a deflection is nothing other than an inordinate affection—that is placing one’s end in a created thing rather than in God. For this reason does the saintly Doctor teach that all evil is the mistaking of means for the end.

Thus we find the deplorable truth that Mrs. X’s unwholesome quest for a pleasing face was the true evil of the case. Her uncomeliness was given to her to use as a means to higher things, namely the things of God. She forgot her end, if ever she was convinced of it. She failed to learn the lesson of happiness,—sacrifice, taught by the blood besmeared Christ, the Son of God made sorrowful unto death “even to the death of the Cross.”

Herein, also, we discover the irrationality of an activity for activity’s sake,—the futility of it all as far as real progress is concerned. Herein we see the reason why so many “no ’counts” (to the mind of the worldling) have been raised to the altar. A desire for truth soon grew into a flaming love. Because of their love, they drank ever more deeply of Truth. So permeated did they become

with it that they could not but live it. But these "no 'counts,"—were they so void of action? How many of them have been stretched on beds of pain because the clay could not stand the activity, the progress to perfection that flourished within. Indeed, it is true that Christ said: "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and art troubled about many things; but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. which shall not be taken away from her." Martha, however, was not to be denied that "best part" entirely. She must have profited much from the Master's rebuke, for she passed to her eternal reward a Mary. So, too, did Bernadette, and Aquinas, and Therese, and Peter, and Joseph, and Thomas, and every other Saint canonized and uncanonized. It was the "Mary" in them that pulled them through.