

# WE, YOUR HOLY PEOPLE

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

**F**EW of us believe that we are saints, and the few who do are most certainly deceiving themselves. But this awareness of our lack of holiness must not be allowed to obscure the fact that the christian vocation is a call to sanctity. We are 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people'.<sup>1</sup> Each christian is chosen by God, not because he is already holy, but in order that he may enter through baptism on the way of holiness. Of old, when God called the children of Israel, it was not because of any merits of their own.<sup>2</sup> They were to be holy because their God was holy; the exigency of sanctity stemmed from the nature of him who had chosen them. In the same way, the children of the new Israel must be perfect like their heavenly Father.<sup>3</sup> Members of Christ's body, we form a holy Church whose sanctity is manifested not only in her unique divine Head but in the lives of individual christians. The long list of canonised saints bear witness to the vitality of the Spirit's sanctifying power at work within the Church in every age. True devotion to the saints, as the liturgy reveals, is never separated from the desire to imitate them. They are put before us to encourage us on the way of holiness, to lead us to Christ their exemplar.

Ignatius of Loyola's reaction to his reading of the lives of the saints was to say, 'St Dominic did this so I must do it; St Francis did that so I must do it'.<sup>4</sup> This was certainly a naive over-simplification, which led Ignatius into regrettable exaggerations; but his intuition was basically sound. He saw no reason, not even in his past sins, why he should not have confidence that the grace of God would work as powerfully in himself as in a Dominic or a Francis. He realised that the grace of God is never lacking; but his presumption and his mistake was to imagine that grace would lead him where he chose, along a path which suited neither his temperament nor the age in which he lived. God did not want a second Dominic or a second Francis for his Church, he wanted a first Ignatius. But Ignatius' reaction was the right one. The lives of the saints

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Pet 2, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Deut 8, 17; 9, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 5, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Autobiography no. 7.

gave him the desire to do great things for God. They made him aware that as a member of Christ's body he was called to share in the same reality of holiness which their lives revealed.

The adage that the lives of the saints are intended for our admiration and not our imitation can only too easily be used as an excuse for comfortable but ineffective mediocrity in God's service. Indeed a debased school of hagiography has so de-humanised and stereotyped the holy ones of God, that many of us find little to admire in them. We feel that if this is sanctity we want none of it. But the mystery of sanctity is the mystery of the Church to which we belong, because it is the mystery of God himself. If we wish to find a true picture of holiness to which we are called, we must turn to the Church's liturgy where she celebrates her saints.

Good christians are sometimes apprehensive about the liturgy. Unthinking enthusiasts, in their reaction against the exaggerations of certain devotional practices, often give the impression that to be truly liturgically minded one must abandon devotion to the saints of the Church. But it is precisely in the liturgy that we find the solid theological basis of devotion to the saints. Their real splendour, and the honour which the Church pays to them, is to be found in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of their master, Christ.

Before all else the Church wishes us to rejoice in the holiness of our brothers and sisters in the family of God. The prayer 'May your saints, Lord, be everywhere a source of joy for us'<sup>1</sup> expresses a theme which predominates in the common masses of the saints and is re-echoed in the sanctoral, the 'Proper of the Saints'.<sup>2</sup> For the saints who belong to God belong also to us. Their strength is the support our weakness needs.<sup>3</sup> Their lives are a source of inspiration for us.<sup>4</sup> Men and women like us, subject to all our weaknesses and inconsistencies, they have conquered in the name of Christ and risen glorious with him. In their individual lives we contemplate again the present, active reality of the work of redemption, and the re-affirmation of the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice for us. Our gladness in the triumph of the saints is not distinct from that paschal joy which permeates the Easter liturgy. We rejoice 'in the Lord' on the feast-days of the saints. It is the victory of the risen Christ which is the source of all christian joy. The saints

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<sup>1</sup> Secret prayer: Mass *Statuit* of a confessor bishop.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Introit for All Saints; cf. Introit for 5th February, St Agatha.

<sup>3</sup> Collect: Mass *Statuit* of a martyr bishop.

<sup>4</sup> Collect: Mass *Salus autem* of many martyrs.

have shared in his victory and his joy overflows through them to his Church.

The '*propter nos homines*' of Christ's earthly life is also the guiding principle of the lives of the saints. What God works in the individual he works for the benefit of all. The merits and prayers of the saints with Christ are the common store of the people of God. Their holiness makes up for our sinfulness. So we rejoice with them whose joy is to continue their service of the Church by their constant presence and protection. Together they repeat to us the words of St Paul, 'Indeed if my very blood must be poured out in libation over the sacrifice and offering of your faith, I am happy and rejoice with you all, as you should, in your turn be happy, and rejoice with me'.<sup>1</sup> The entire Church benefits from the sanctity of the individual saint, and each saint responds in the name of the entire Church to the charity of Christ, source of all sanctity.

The first saints venerated by the Church were her martyrs. Martyrdom was perfect conformity with the pattern of Christ's own life. 'Let me copy the passion of my God' was the cry of the martyr Ignatius of Antioch.<sup>2</sup> With Christ the martyrs shared in the supreme work of charity: that of laying down their lives not only for their friends but also for their enemies. The epistle of the mass for the feast of SS. Gervase and Protase makes the point, 'Rejoice in the measure in which you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed joy and gladness will be yours'.<sup>3</sup> The martyrs have borne the yoke of Christ and taken up with him the burden of his cross.<sup>4</sup> Their glory is that they have been moulded not only spiritually by baptism into the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection, but even physically they have re-produced his passion and death.

The martyrs, then, are honoured in Christ, the King of Martyrs. Their glory consists in their likeness to him. They are able to intercede for us, not on their own account, but because they are united to the one mediator, Christ; and their prayers are acceptable because, like all the prayers of the Church, they rise to the Father *per Dominum nostrum Jesum Christum*. Devotion to the martyrs is entirely directed towards Christ. 'As for the martyrs it is in their quality of disciples and imitators of the Lord that we love them; and they deserve it because of their unreserved attachment to their

<sup>1</sup> Phil 2, 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> *Epistle to the Romans* VI (PG 5, 693).

<sup>3</sup> I Pet 4, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gospel of the Mass of SS. Primus and Felician, June 9.

king and master'.<sup>1</sup> Since the martyrs' sacrifice took its significance and value from its integration in the unique sacrifice of Christ, it is not surprising that devotion to the martyrs should find its expression in the celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice. The secret prayer of the mass for Thursday in the third week of Lent, celebrated at the Church of SS. Cosmas and Damian, speaks of 'the sacrifice which is the origin of all martyrdom'. Ignatius of Antioch expressed his desire for martyrdom in a Eucharistic symbol: 'Let me be food for wild beasts, for thus I shall be able to reach God. I am God's wheat, to be ground by animals' teeth into Christ's good bread . . . When the world cannot even see my body, then I shall be a true follower of Jesus Christ'.<sup>2</sup> Just as in the sacrament of the Eucharist Christ assimilates his Church to himself by becoming its food of life, so the martyr was assimilated to Christ and became too a source of life for the Church: *sanguis martyrurum semen christianorum*. In the martyrs Christ was suffering again, 'another will be in me and will suffer in me because I am ready also to suffer for him':<sup>3</sup> the redemptive power of the passion flowed through them for the salvation of the world.

In the canon of the Mass of the Roman rite we venerate the memory of the martyrs, not as something in the past, but as a present reality. Their temporal suffering has been assumed into the eternal to-day of Christ's sacrifice, and its value is renewed in each mass for the benefit of those who are in communion with the saints of God.<sup>4</sup> It is not pious imagination but solid faith which inspires the antiphon for the *Magnificat* on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul: 'To-day Simon Peter ascended the gallows of the cross, alleluia; today the key-bearer of the kingdom went his joyful way to Christ'. The memory of the martyrs is transformed in the memorial of the Lord into an ever present reality for his Church.

Martyrdom was not the only form of sanctity in the early Church, but it became the type of all sanctity. It provided the foundations for subsequent theological reflection on the mystery of sanctity in times when persecution no longer provided the opportunity for martyrdom. The martyr emphasised that all sanctity must be thought of in terms of conformity and assimilation to the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. Christianity is an adherence to

<sup>1</sup> *Letter of the Church of Smyrna on the martyrdom of their Bishop Polycarp* XVII (PG 5, 1041).

<sup>2</sup> *Epistle to the Romans* IV (PG 5, 689).

<sup>3</sup> Words of St Felicity from the *Passio SS. Martyrum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* V (PL 3, 47).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the prayer *Communicantes*.

Christ our Lord which brings man face to face with the fundamental choice between life and death. Faithful unto death, the martyr professed his faith in Jesus Christ the only saviour of the world. To become a disciple of Christ in the age of the martyrs was to be ready to die for him. For many baptism was a sentence of death. Associated with Christ in suffering, death and resurrection the martyrs emphasise that all holiness must be understood in terms of union with the mystery of Christ's work of redemption through his Church. A predominant trait of the martyrs' holiness is an inflexible faith in the future life. Their deaths were not an end but a way into life, and the spiritual force of their lives was not extinguished by physical death. For the Church the death of a martyr is never a deprivation, but the source of her growth. The mystery of sanctity is concerned not with addition and multiplication of activities and practices but with the depth and intensity of each vital decision.

The first-fruits of sanctity in the Church were the martyrs, and even after the epoch of martyrdom holiness demanded a christian death with Christ. 'Mortify and crucify your body and you too will receive the martyr's crown' says St John Chrysostom.<sup>1</sup> This was the ideal of the early hermits and monks. They went out into the desert, the Lord's own battleground, to come to grips with their adversary the devil. Here again the option was life or death: the spiritual death to sin with its concomitant growth in the life of Christ's charity, or the eternal death of submission to evil. Our Lord's words, 'If thou hast a mind to be perfect go home and sell all that belongs to thee: give it to the poor and so the treasure thou hast shall be in heaven: then come back and follow me', were the first inspiration of St Anthony, the Father of monasticism.<sup>2</sup> The weapons of these ancient heroes of God were prayer and fasting, for the devil is driven out by these. Their rugged asceticism does not attract the modern christian. A superficial judgement might suggest that they believed that by maltreating the body they were doing good to their souls. Nothing was further from their ideals and their practice. Of course there were abuses and indiscretions, but the Fathers of the desert were the first to condemn them. Certainly Anthony, who died at the age of 105, did not curtail his life by

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<sup>1</sup> *In Epistola ad Hebraeos* VI (PG 63, 93).

<sup>2</sup> Mt 19, 21. Cf. St Athanasius, *Life of St Anthony* (Ancient Christian Writers no. 10, 1950) p. 19.

imprudent penance. Furthermore, the desert gave to the Church its greatest spiritual directors, masters of that discretion which they regarded as the governing principle of all authentic virtue. They knew what they were about. Their austerity was a means to union with Christ, and the lasting impact they had on their age indicates that it was the right means. Perhaps we cannot transpose their practices into a modern context; but that should not blind us to the message of their sanctity.

The gospel of the Mass for the feast of St Anthony reveals the secret of their holiness: a vigorous and vigilant 'waiting for Christ': 'at what hour you think not the Son of man will come'.<sup>1</sup> The bloodless martyrdom of the desert was a daily death with Christ. Anthony's own struggle lasted for seventy vigilant years, during which he expected and met Christ in every moment. He and his followers show that the holiness of the martyrs is not limited to the moment of death. The supreme act of martyrdom is capable of being transposed into the routine of a day-to-day life. The mystery of the Church's sanctification of the world is the mystery of the slow but steady penetration of daily existence with the spirit of divine charity. The fundamental christian option of leaving everything for Christ can be expressed by living with Christ as well as by dying with him. But the guiding principle of sanctity was the same: conformity with Christ in the service of the Church. In Origen's phrase, the saint was '*vir ecclesiasticus*', the man whose life was wholly integrated into the life of Christ's Church.

The Fathers teach that the ideal of sanctity enshrined in the martyrs' charity is to be found also in the life of the consecrated virgin. St Methodius of Olympus writes plainly: 'The Lord reveals that the order and holy choir of Virgins will be the first to follow in His train . . . For they were martyrs, not by enduring brief corporal pains for a space of time, but because they had the courage all their lives not to shrink from the truly Olympic contest of chastity'.<sup>2</sup> Every whole-hearted following of Christ must involve a death with him. Christ has given himself entirely to his Bride the Church. In his choice of her and his gift of himself to her, he offers her the possibility a making a return of love; so the Church gives herself entirely to her Bridegroom. In the consecration of a virgin, the Church recognises Christ's gift of himself to his people and her

<sup>1</sup> 17 January: Lk 12, 35-40.

<sup>2</sup> *The Symposium, Logos* 7, 3, Ancient Christian Writers, (Vol XXVII, 1958) p. 99.

own gift of herself to him. The virgin stands before Christ and the Church as one who mirrors his whole-hearted, unconditional love. She is his bride; and her eyes are fastened on him in loving expectation of his coming. Hence the choice of the parable of the ten virgins as the gospel of three of the masses for the common of virgins.<sup>1</sup> For the holiness of christian virginity can only be understood by giving full emphasis to its eschatological meaning. The virgin's whole-hearted love of Christ reveals a Church waiting with eager longing for the coming of Christ. Virginity is meaningful only when it is 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven',<sup>2</sup> in view of the world to come, where the Church will be eternally united with her lover Christ, in the charity of the Trinity. For the modern pagan, virginity is sterile death. For the christian it is that fruitful, maternal, virginity of the Church, pre-figured in the mother of God, by which Christ is given to the world.

The liturgy of the masses of the Sanctoral is the fruit of the Church's prayerful reflection on the mystery of her sanctity, as she contemplates the 'types' of sanctity: the martyr, the apostle, the confessor, the bishop, the virgin, the holy women, married or widowed. The gospel reading takes us beyond the individual saint to the source of his or her sanctity, Christ our Lord. In the disciple and imitator of the Lord our gaze meets Jesus. Each saint makes present to the Church a particular and necessarily imperfect reflection of the plenitude of Christ's sanctity. Each in his own way brings into relief an aspect of the mystery of the holy Church. Aware of the limited holiness of the individual saint, the liturgy directs our attention constantly to the whole procession of saints. The phrase 'all the saints' is repeated ten times in the ordinary of the Mass in the Roman rite. Never is the individual dissociated from this fellowship of all the saints, which approaches more nearly the plenitude of Christ's holiness. Indeed the liturgy is more concerned with confronting the faithful with the full dimensions of their holy vocation than with the characteristics of the individual saint.

The Church would have us admire through the individual saint the mystery of Christ's sanctity. This admiration is the first step towards imitation; for we ourselves belong with the saints. Members of the Church, we communicate in the manifold holiness she displays in her members. 'The feasts of the martyrs are exhortations to

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<sup>1</sup> The Masses *Loquebar, Dilexisti, Vultum tuum*; Mt 25, 1-13.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 19, 12.

martyrdom; so we should not be ashamed to imitate what we are glad to celebrate'.<sup>1</sup>

What the Church would have us imitate is not a particular saint. We are not to model ourselves upon the saint of our own choosing, and so run the risk of developing in ourselves an individualistic form of piety. She teaches us to discern amidst individual characteristics the evangelical principle from which their sanctity takes its inspiration. She educates our understanding to see that sanctity is not a question of doing this or that particular work, but of living according to this or that particular attitude of soul. Solid devotion to the saints has suffered by being disassociated from the liturgy in which it had its origin; and indifferent hagiography has distorted the notion of sanctity. Is it not true that the faithful so often equate morality with sanctity? How many religious have the keeping of their rule as their only criterion of holiness? How often is holiness presented in terms of the heroic fulfilment of every detail of the law; and the saints' human failings and quirks of character glossed over!

It is sad to reflect on this in the light of all that St Paul has to say about the inability of the law to procure justification. It is only when a man is newly created after the image of Christ, that he is justified and sanctified through the truth which is Christ.<sup>2</sup> To think of sanctity merely in terms of moral rectitude is the high road to pharisaism. As William Blake wrote: 'If christianity were morality then Socrates was the Saviour!' Christian justification comes by belief in Christ; it is 'knowing him and the power of his resurrection, and what it means to share in his sufferings, moulded into the pattern of his death, in the hope of achieving resurrection from the dead'.<sup>3</sup> Christian living depends entirely on this relationship with Christ; faithful observance of the loftiest ethical code can never establish such a relationship. The christian understands the gift that God has given him by adopting him in the Spirit as His child, and is thus encouraged to live by the Spirit. It is true that sin and sanctity are diametrically opposed; but heaven preserve us from defining the positive power of sanctity, the virtue and wisdom of Christ, in terms of the avoidance of sin or fulfilment of a law.

The manifestation of God's power in the whole body of the

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<sup>1</sup> Roman Breviary: 2nd nocturn of the common of many martyrs, 1st lesson.

<sup>2</sup> Eph 4, 23. Cf. *THE WAY*, vol 2, no 3 (July 1962) pp. 219-21.

<sup>3</sup> Phil 3, 9-11.



saints is intended to encourage us in our belief that 'he whose power is at work in us is powerful enough and more than powerful enough to carry out his purpose beyond all our hopes and dreams'.<sup>1</sup> The Church never turns a blind eye to our weakness and sinfulness, but neither does she ever dissociate us on that account from the communion of saints. Awareness of sin adds to her prayers a note of urgency, but never of discouragement. It is precisely because we are sinful that we need the saints: 'Almighty God, look down upon our weakness; and because we are burdened with the weight of our own actions may the glorious intercession of your martyr and bishop protect us'.<sup>2</sup> It is by laying firm hold on our fellowship with the saints in Christ that we shall become like them.

Furthermore, the Church's liturgy is preoccupied in leading us with the saints, and by their help, to the source of sanctity, 'the most holy mysteries, in which you have established the source of all holiness'.<sup>3</sup> The mass is the work of salvation and sanctification in which we co-operate as a body with our head Christ. St Augustine saw no incongruity in addressing the congregation at mass as *Sanctitas vestra*, 'Your holiness'. As we assemble in worship before God we are his 'holy people'. But our holiness comes from our participation in the great work of redemption which is Christ's sacrifice. In the mass we re-enact in the present the mystery of holiness which is expressed in the passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ our Lord.<sup>4</sup> Christ alone is holy – *tu solus sanctus* – as we pray in the *Gloria*; holiness can come only from our association with him. The Church is holy because her head is holy.

The members of the Church become holy in the measure in which they begin to live the Eucharist which they celebrate. 'Those who are going to die for Christ must remember the Eucharist which they have received', writes St Cyprian. We have seen what that memory meant for Ignatius of Antioch. In the same way, those who are to *live* for Christ must remember the Eucharist they have received.<sup>5</sup> For there is no recipe for sanctity, no magic formula. Holiness is a becoming like Christ, a giving of oneself 'through him and with him and in him' for the building up of his body the Church. The sacraments produce effectively what they signify. In the Eucharist the people of God are assimilated to Christ so that

<sup>1</sup> Eph 3, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Collect: Mass *Statuit* of a martyr bishop.

<sup>3</sup> Secret: Mass of St Ignatius Loyola, 31 July.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. The prayer *Unde et memores*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Spiritual Vocabulary, *THE WAY*, vol 2, no 2 (April 1962) 'Commemoration'.

they may live by him. We eat the body of Christ in order to become like him. That sharing in the body of the Lord is a heralding of his death until he comes again. It is in the firm hope of the resurrection that the christian engages himself upon the way of detachment which the cross signifies. The liturgy is intent upon revealing the clear light of Christ in the lives of her saints, to teach us that sanctity is not the sculpting of a perfect image of ourselves; it is allowing ourselves to be sculpted by the hands of God so that we fit into the temple of which Christ is the keystone.<sup>1</sup>

But sanctity is not passive submission alone. The sacraments do not work automatically and independently of those who receive them, in the sense that they dispense with any human activity on our part. God works in us but not apart from our co-operation. We can thwart his designs. We can nullify the effect of the Eucharist by failing to discern the body of the Lord. We must learn to become and to be what we receive. 'What is accomplished in the Head must be accomplished in the members – incarnation, death and resurrection: i.e. putting down roots, detachment and transfiguration. There is no christian spirituality without this three-fold rhythm'.<sup>2</sup>

We have to learn through the Eucharist to discern the body of the Lord in the details of our lives, to recognise the latent material for our sanctification in the human realities which make up our daily existence. It is this which we offer to Christ so that he may ratify our oblation and transform it with the words *Hoc est enim corpus meum*. 'This is my body, this love of man and wife, this sickness, this work, this forgiveness of enemies, this selfless service of the poor, this joy, this sorrow; this is my body – these lives which are given with Me for the sanctification of the world.' Christ is our life, we are his holy people destined to make him manifest in the world. Day-to-day routine should never be considered as an impediment to holiness. The dead weight of human existence, even at its most material, is capable of being transformed by the sanctifying power of divine love. That is the faith and the possibility which our vocation as God's holy people holds out to us. We reach out to grasp that possibility and make of it a living reality when, together with all the saints under our head Jesus Christ, we sanctify ourselves for the sake of our brethren. The liturgy would have us learn that holiness is not our private affair, it is the concern of the Church, of that communion of saints to which we sinners belong.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. The hymn *Caelestis Urbs Jerusalem* – Vespers, the Office of the Dedication of a Church.

<sup>2</sup> H. de Lubac, *Paradoxes* (Paris, 1949) p. 77.