

TRADITION AND 'SAINTS' LIVES'

The Art of hagiography

By PAUL MOLINARI

THE CHURCH has always believed', says Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 'that the apostles and martyrs . . . are united to us in Christ by a special intimacy. She has always venerated their memory with particular affection, together with the blessed Virgin Mary and the holy angels, and has implored their aid and intercession with true devotion' (*Lumen Gentium*, 50). The same text goes on to say that across the centuries their numbers have found increase through so many more who became pre-eminent in their attachment to him in his virginity and poverty and the other christian virtues; and the Church has continued to present their holiness to Christ's faithful for veneration and imitation.

This compendious statement shows that the Church's tradition concerning her saints has its roots in Sacred Scripture, and is part of that growth in the understanding of what is handed on 'through the contemplation and consideration of believers who treasure these things in their hearts (cf Lk 2, 19.51) by their experience and the intimate sense of these spiritual realities' (*Dei Verbum*, 8). This experience is uniquely verified in the Eucharistic liturgy, where 'by celebrating their anniversaries, the Church proclaims the paschal mystery in her saints who have shared Christ's sufferings and are now glorified with him, and shows them forth as men and women who draw the faithful to the Father through Christ' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 104).

It is clear that written records concerning the sayings and doings of the saints will have a crucial part to play in this tradition, as well as that instinct for sound judgment which is supported by the charism of discernment — the God-given ability to distinguish between the true and the false in the order of salvation. The

Reformation led to the wholesale rejection of this immemorial cult of the saints by generations of Christians, and the years which followed Vatican Council II witnessed an over-zealous reaction, within the Catholic Church itself, against the promotion of 'Causes for Beatification and Canonization'. Such rejection and reaction, it may be fairly argued, was due in no small measure to the uncritical and often fictitious nature of the chronicles of the saints. It is the purpose of this article to state clearly, and as fully as space permits, the criteria for the renewal and maintenance of sound tradition in the writing of and judgment of 'Saints' Lives'.

The redoubtable historian of spirituality, Père Pourrat, has set out for us the basic characteristics of hagiography, after the invention of printing, which coincided so closely in time with the Reformation, until the end of the nineteenth century:

At the beginning of this period, the authors of the lives of the saints of christian antiquity tended to concentrate almost exclusively on 'giving edification'. The result was that they paid scant regard to historical truth. . . . A critical examination of these biographies reveals that they are full of 'legendary' material. Their chief constant is the marvellous. . . . The more substantial an event was in this regard, the more satisfying to the biographer, who was in no way concerned to discover whether the story was true or not. This predominant urge to edify led the biographer to present his narrative in the style of a panegyric. If the saint happened to be involved in any sort of blunder, it was glossed over or even left out altogether. Mistakes made in good faith were frequently made to look like providential occurrences. . . . The story of the actual life of the saint was quickly told. But when it came to the virtues of their heroes or heroines, the biographers lingered over the efforts made in order to grow in holiness. Thus the saints were never presented as living examples, but relegated to the environment of the ideal and of an unreal world. (*Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, tome 1, col 1715).

Such a critique is still valid in more modern cases: generally speaking, they tend to be historically suspect. It is taken for granted that, since their chief purpose is to edify, they will be tediously moralizing and uniformly laudatory.

However, there are several current exceptions. Since the pioneering work of the Bollandists, which began in the closing decades of the sixteenth century, and with the avowed purpose of purging the old saints' lives of apocryphal and legendary detail, biographers began to concentrate on historical truth, literary quality,

sound psychology and theological perspective. By following such criteria, biographers can present us with holiness in a truly human context, which can prompt us to open our hearts and minds to those gifts of God so freely offered to each one of us through Christ in the working of the Holy Spirit.

The demands and criteria of historical truth

The first and fundamental requirement in the presentation of a saint's life — that is, the story of the extraordinary relationship established by God with one of his creatures in the course of his earthly life — is an objective and accurate description of this mutual relationship. If such a demand is to be met, the biographer must scrupulously hold fast to all the principles which govern historiography: that is, to study diligently all the authentic and historically trustworthy sources, to compare them with one another, to form a judgment on their respective value and, on the basis of his investigations, to set out in chronological and organic order the life and activity, the achievements of the saints. Once he has assembled his material for an accurate description of the life and works of his subject, the biographer must use the same criteria to investigate, for the same purpose of objective assessment, the general and particular environment and circumstances.

It may seem otiose to mention that the main sources will be the testimony of those who knew the saint, their writings, letters, activities, their judgments concerning actual situations and their form of presentation. However, it is certainly worth noting that, for a proper appreciation and interpretation of the large amount of material contained in these sources concerning the various chapters in the life of the saint and the aspects of his or her personality, the most important tool for study is surely what is called the *Positio*. This is the most complete collection of the testimony — recorded word for word — of the witnesses, as well as of any and every document, duly authenticated, which might have a bearing on the life and character of the person, prepared, according to most exacting procedural rules, for the examination of a cause for beatification and canonization by the Sacred Congregation for Causes of Saints. One may safely say that whoever undertakes the study of any saint with the object of writing his or her biography cannot afford to neglect this abundant material, which is all the more valuable for the light it sheds on events and facts which might otherwise pass unnoticed or remain obscure, difficult to understand or to assess with any

accuracy. It is in fact a body of material which is absolutely essential for drawing an accurate and informed picture of the saint.

One need hardly say that the cardinal principle in hagiography, as in any other historical work, is never to suppress or to qualify, by omission or distortion, whatever is objectively known. What must be avoided is any tendency to describe certain events in minute detail and with extra emphasis, whilst keeping a relative silence about others. What is actually written so often reverses this principle. Undue attention is given to what smacks of the sensational, whilst all that has to do with the ordinary and the normal — the monotony of everyday life — is left untold. And yet the true historical personality is revealed not in the extraordinary sensational happenings, but in the daily grind.

Psychological criteria

The principles which should guide us in applying such criteria in hagiography would seem to be the following. First, we ought not to exclude *a priori* any scientific method worthy of the name which can serve to augment our knowledge of the saint. On the contrary, all the methods seriously proposed by modern science must be used to our advantage. We reject the opinion that the application of these methods are near blasphemous or at least unworthy where the question of holiness is at stake. It is our conviction that the contributions offered by the psychological sciences, granted that they are the result of accurate and serious study, can only add to our knowledge of the saint and of the divine influence on his life and personality. The principle that the truth can only serve to increase God's glory is certainly valid here as elsewhere.

Since, however, we are dealing with historical truth which is divine as well as human, there is need for the greatest possible reverence. We must reject any form of amateurism with the utmost firmness. We need to bear in mind that psychology is a science which is still in its youth, so that its methods need to be applied with the greatest care by really capable practitioners who have had extensive and varied experience. Indeed the acknowledged experts in the behavioural sciences are the first to insist on the need of the greatest caution in using their methods in the field of hagiography, especially when it is a question of research into the mind of a person now dead, perhaps for centuries. Nor must we forget that the methods of experimental psychology have not yet advanced beyond the research stage, and that therefore in many practical cases they

cannot be applied with a truly scientific exactitude. At best, they can offer a more or less probable opinion and useful lines of enquiry which can be employed to verify or fill out a judgment substantially based on other criteria. Practically every method currently used in the behavioural sciences is experimental in the popular sense of the term, and we are still far from common acceptance on matters of principle. Hence we can hardly accept their conclusions as certain and definitive.

We may say then that certain psychological methods can provide us with information concerning the congenital dispositions of the saints; and that such information can be useful in assessing certain actions and observable facts. At the same time, in evaluating the entire behaviour of the person, there are many factors which clearly fall beyond the scope of the behavioural sciences. The obvious example is that there is no instrument which can measure the grace of God, no scientific method of the purely human kind which can discover its workings or its dimensions. There is a real need for theological rigour in this area; particularly as many practitioners of experimental psychology are often of a materialistic or even atheistic bent; and much of what they have written reveals that their methodology is equally godless.

As a general principle, then, we may assume that the stance of the hagiographer must be that of the moral and pastoral theologian. Solid psychological knowledge, carefully applied by experts in the field of the behavioural sciences, can be of considerable help in matters hagiographical. But in the hands of incompetents, the amateurs and those with prejudices and notions which run counter to catholic theology, hagiographical material can lead to serious harm and only injure historical truth. One may well ask, then, whether there is any necessity or profit in having recourse to psychology and its methods in hagiographical research. Perhaps the best way of solving any doubts is to give an example in which a sound application of psychological methods has been singularly successful.

The example we have chosen is a recent study of an autograph of St Stanislaus Kostka, which records the results of analyses by various experts. These investigations were carried out with a real competence, and, if one may say so, with an objective and straightforward humility by specialists who were unaware of the identity of the subject. Their main conclusions were identical. Temperamentally, Stanislaus was far from being the sweet angelic character

so often described by his biographers, but a young man of a head-strong, fiery disposition. It was a conclusion of extreme importance, since it demonstrated the heroic sanctity of the young man who, through the grace of God and the force of his responses, was enabled to become the incarnation of kindliness, gentleness and self-control.¹

It would, then, seem sensible to conclude that, at least in certain cases, the application of the fundamental principles of the psychological sciences can become a necessary requirement in the field of hagiography, in that the prudent use of these methods can prevent us from reaching and giving vent to mistaken judgments concerning the personality and temperament of the saint, and can help us to overturn facile assertions taken from what can only be described as a pseudo-psychology.

One might go further and say that if in modern catholic hagiography insufficient use is made of these more recent means of achieving a more rounded knowledge of the saint's character, this is probably because some have been too prone to follow the views of the amateur psychologists, and have adopted a too casual and naturalistic approach to a subject that demands the greatest reverence and respect.

Literary standards

Here we are dealing with style, language and other elements of prose and composition which make a book intelligible, pleasing and satisfying. One need hardly say that it is not sufficient for the author of a saint's life simply to hold his reader's attention; the latter's response must be increasingly one of admiration for the saint and for christian holiness, to the point at which he feels drawn to live a better life himself. The author must, therefore, be a talented craftsman in his own right, and determined to get the best out of his subject.

We have been blessed in recent years by a considerable number of biographies, written by authors who have showed themselves endowed with the necessary literary talent and also with qualities required for research, both historical and theological. Through works such as these we have learnt that, in most cases, following the chronological order of life and events is preferable to any other arrangement of the material, certainly from the literary point of view. It has become clear that the previous method of dividing the work into two parts — the life and the virtues — tends to lose the interest of, if not to bore, the reader.

¹ Cf J. Warszawski S.I., *Inquisitiones super authographum S. Stanislai Kostka* (Rome, 1959).

The modern reader, it is clear, is impatient of long drawn-out and over-explicit moralizing. The art of the hagiographer has become a more subtle one. He has had to learn how to present his material in a way in which the story is allowed to speak for itself; where the events narrated are themselves an invitation to learn from the example of the saint. Where the average reader has grown accustomed to the sober elegance of style which distinguishes the writer of quality, he is far less likely to appreciate the hagiographer who makes a habit of pontificating about the 'state of soul' of his subject or of narrating events in the manner of a schoolmaster teaching his class. In any case, the intelligent reader is well enough aware that the key-aspects of the interior life of any person of his acquaintance needs a light and delicate touch: in the last analysis they defy description and are completely overlaid by the heavy moralizing hand. If they cannot be made to speak for themselves, they deserve a respectful silence. If this is true of every human personality, how much more so with the saint who was intimately involved in the hidden and mysterious leading of the Lord. One can only hope to induce in the intelligent reader a personal reflection on the thoughts and feelings which the narrative may succeed in evoking. Explanations, repeated and elementary interpretations, dogmatic opinions can only annoy and frustrate the educated reader.

It is true that the above observations do not apply univocally to every class of reader. These criteria must be adapted to the practical needs of the younger or less sophisticated, and the biographer must accept the role of the educator. It may even be said that the hagiographer needs a greater ingenuity in his presentation, and that he can learn from the observations of the psychologists concerning the receptivity of different classes of reader, the possibilities open to him of capturing and holding their attention.

Theological criteria

Space prevents us from doing justice to all the theological requirements which need to be kept in view by the hagiographer. We can only touch on the most important and fundamental principles essential to telling the story of a saint.

The first principle is linked directly to the fact that the saints are held up to us by the Church as examples of the authentic and perfect christian life. Two presuppositions follow from this. The first is that the circumstances of the subject's life be identical with or very like those of the readers of the biography. The second is that, given the

substantial identity of the circumstances, there be a real possibility that the saint's life is truly exemplary: that is, it can be imitated and followed in practice. Otherwise we cannot speak of 'example' in any intelligible sense.

In other words, it must be shown that the saint's environment, with its existential and theological circumstances, is sufficiently like our own, but that he lived within it in exemplary fashion. The writer must constantly have in mind and insist on the fact that his saint can indeed be imitated: that is, that saints are conceived of and presented as human beings, and not as though they were some kind of supermen or angelic creatures. They must not be idealized but set forth exactly as they are: men and women of flesh and blood, ontologically and psychologically, made up of body and soul, flesh and spirit.

They must also be presented as true historical figures: as people who, along with the rest of humankind, are called to the supernatural life, but also subject to the conditions imposed on fallen human nature, and therefore to the same long, slow and painful process of reintegration. They experience, that is, the physical limitations of weariness, deformity, sickness, old age and death; exposure to mental limitations, such as slowness of understanding and human fallibility; constitutional drawbacks, such as defects of temperament, disposition and character; moral weaknesses, such as being exposed to temptation and to sinfulness, possessing a particular inclination towards certain kinds of sin, to the extent that they actually commit sin, at least those called semi-deliberate, even after they have experienced conversion. It is only our Lord, because of the hypostatic union, and our Lady, by reason of her divine motherhood, who were totally immune from original sin and every kind of actual sin. A sound theology demands that in our understanding of the saints we also make allowance for the fact that they, like the rest of the human race, were subject to the effects of original sin.

Exactly the same must be said about the effects of the Redemption. They involve the saints in precisely the same painful, lengthy and gradual process. No solid theological argument exists for the view that the fruits of Redemption are applied to the saints in substantially different ways from other human beings. On the contrary, sound catholic doctrine teaches that the saints truly exemplify the authentic christian life for this precise reason.

In the light of this substantial identity of the human condition

between the saints and ourselves, we are able to clarify many other aspects of theological importance. The first is the one emphasized by the Council: all Christians are called to holiness in virtue of their baptism. At the same time, though christian holiness is all of a piece, it is not the same for everyone:

The holiness of the Church is expressed in a great many ways, amongst individual people . . . who in their own particular form of life move towards the perfection of love (*Lumen Gentium*, 39).

All the faithful, no matter what their state or vocation, are called to the fulness of Christian life and to the perfection of holiness (40).

The forms and duties of life are varied, but there is one holiness: it is this which is fostered in all who are moved by the Spirit of God. . . .

Each one, however, according to his own proper gifts and tasks must advance unceasingly along the way of living faith (41).

Holiness, then, is to be achieved in a variety of degrees and forms in accordance with the graces and gifts which God distributes in his absolute and sovereign freedom. 'Grace has been given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift' (Eph 4, 7).

According to the theological principles here espoused by the Church in Council, it is clear that we can and ought to speak of a single vocation to a radical christian holiness which applies to all faithful. This consists in fact in the union with God in Christ. By reason of their calling, of baptism received in faith, every Christian must seek to be united in an ever deeper love with Christ and to share his life, so that he or she is vivified by his Spirit. So it is that each of us is offered the same substantial means for our sanctification: baptism and the Eucharist, whose purpose is to establish, foster and to strengthen the ontological, vital and personal relationship between Christ and the Christian.

It would, however, be a serious mistake to conclude from this that all Christians are called to the same type and degree of union with Christ. There are countless ways of sharing in his inexhaustible riches. The multiple forms and modes open to man are clearly linked to the diversity of vocation and state of life. These, in turn, are related to the different ways in which God works in each person, as he gives to the individual a specific capacity of living out his or her union with Christ and establishes with each one an interpersonal relationship flowing from the divine unicity but shaped according to God's own will. No one can presume to impose upon God the manner in which he wishes to form this relationship and to endow it with his gifts and graces.

The need of stressing this basic principle is obvious. The hagiographer who has not grasped it will inevitably — as so often happens — present each saintly figure with stereotyped characteristics, as an example to be followed by all and in all situations, no matter how different the saint's may be from those of his respective readers. Only in so far as various saintly people are presented as responding in a manner proper to their own calling within their own environment, will hagiography succeed in bringing out the rich diversity in the Church's spiritual approaches and responses to the Lord. Only thus will it be possible for people to build their lives on these 'models' which God in his providence is offering them.

It is equally important that the hagiographer have a clear idea of holiness, as well as the ability to communicate this in his writing. As we have said, *Lumen Gentium* has specified its substance as union with Christ. To develop this further, the notion of heroic holiness or heroicity of virtue must be formulated in conformity with and dependence on the authentic sources of theology, Sacred Scripture and ecclesial tradition.

Specific considerations for trustworthy hagiography

The hagiographer must first possess the ability to distinguish clearly between the essential elements of holiness and its variables and accidentals. Expressed in a negative way, the essential for heroicity of virtue is avoiding sin; positively, it is the exercise of virtue over a long period with alacrity and eagerness, and motivated simply by the love of God. He must therefore show that the entire life of the saint, from the time when he or she began to aspire seriously and consistently after heroic sanctity, was dominated by a supernatural charity founded on theological faith and hope. The person's entire living must be shown to be shot through with the love of God above all other things, a love which reveals itself as supernatural and apostolic, without fear or favour. Once this is established, the writer may concentrate on matters in which exceptional demands are made on the saint. But he must be on his guard against dwelling over-exclusively on the extraordinary, since this is calculated to give his readers a wrong idea of holiness.

In concentrating his attention on this essential element, the good hagiographer will succeed in showing how the saint made progress towards this point of spiritual maturity in the exercise of a virtue demanding an increasing heroism. He will demonstrate the various

stages of this growth in which charity is seen to permeate more and more fully the life of his subject.

It ought never to be forgotten that God, like a good teacher, normally guides his holy ones step by step and in a regular rhythm to the crescendo of sanctity. It will normally happen that the initial phases will yield place gradually, steadily, to a more mature way of living. Thus, in the early stages, there will be a greater emphasis on mortification and the ascetical form of life, whilst towards the end it will usually emerge that the saint has reached an equanimity in his affective life; a certain benignity or loving kindness will be seen to dominate, a spiritual serenity which can only be described as a state approximating to that of 'original justice'. It is because of this objective development in the spiritual life that the experienced hagiographer will generally advise one to keep to a chronological order in one's narrative. Otherwise, the reader is all too easily prone to conclude, mistakenly, that the saint has always possessed from the very beginning that maturity of holiness which is reached only at the end of his or her life.

It cannot be repeated too often that the saints exemplify the christian life and that, therefore, there will be some measure of conformity in this matter of gradual development between the saint and those who look upon him as a model.

In this context, it is necessary to put on record that the spirit of self-denial and penitential practices are a necessary adjunct to growth in holiness, and this for two reasons. First, without such a spirit one can hardly acquire complete mastery over the life of the senses (the negative aspect); secondly, it is love which drives a person to an ever greater conformity with Christ the Redeemer who sacrificed himself for humankind (the positive aspect). There is need, however, for serious reflection here. The extreme severity of penitential practices in the lives of some saints do not belong to the essentials of holiness. Indeed, when we examine the various stages by which a saint arrived at a particular spiritual maturity, we observe that many of them who began by indulging in extremely severe practices, tended to reduce or to mitigate these at a later stage. There is no such principle as 'the more severe the penitential practice, the greater the measure of holiness'. On the contrary, we observe in the lives of certain canonized saints, especially when they have made great progress in a life of virtue, that they appear to pay much closer attention to the cultivation of their natural talents and qualities. There is nothing particularly remarkable about this when

we recall that love and grace build on nature, ennoble it and bring it to perfection. In fact, in proportion as grace and charity heal the wounds of original sin and turn the person around to face his God, with all that he is and all the talents with which he is endowed, the more easily his giftedness glorifies his Maker. It would be a grave mistake for the hagiographer to maintain that heroic sanctity should set about suppressing natural gifts, and that holiness can only come to ripeness in so far as nature is repressed and robbed of its force.

It follows then that the biographer who presents the saint as engaged in a constant and melancholy struggle against evil is doing his subject a serious disservice: 'a sad saint is a holy misery'. One of the truest characteristics of authentic christian holiness is spiritual joy — one which takes delight in the small and the beautiful: the flowers, the animals, those little things of daily life which gladden the heart and in which God's holy ones find him with such ease. These particular aspects of holiness should never be set on one side by the hagiographer. They are in no sense an obstacle to the serious side of the christian life, but rather the reverse. They accord well with a true faith, an unshakeable hope, a constant love and sure sense of humility.

Along with these facets of essential holiness, there are certain lesser elements worthy of notice. The first undoubtedly consists in special graces of prayer. It is certain that the saints prayed regularly and frequently. We are not claiming that they were endowed with extraordinary mystical graces. Even though, speaking generally, God is quick to grant what may be called the lesser mystical gifts to those who do all that they can to respond to his invitations, it is outside anyone's power to make such demands on the divine freedom. Hence it cannot be proven theologically that even to one who has corresponded with all his powers to divine grace, infused contemplation is, so to speak, owed to him: by which we mean the conscious awareness of the divine presence in the soul. The hagiographer must be on his guard against giving the impression that essential holiness is centred in these graces, no matter how precious and profitable they may be along the road to sanctity.

These precautionary remarks about infused contemplation should be applied with even greater rigour to the secondary elements of the mystical life, such as visions, revelations, locutions, rapture and so on. The power of working miracles of any kind and the absolute necessity of avoiding giving the impression that it is an essential ingredient of holiness need not be mentioned; even though,

unfortunately, there still exist many hagiographers and charismatic theologians who, in emphasizing the importance of extraordinary gifts, give the impression that visions and miracles are essential marks of holiness.

Defective hagiography

After discussing the positive qualities which the theologian should look for in the lives of saints, it is logical that one should indicate the more common defects. If it is true that certain authors fail to distinguish clearly the essential and accidental elements proper to Christian holiness, a much more noteworthy fault is to forget that spiritual maturity, achieved by the saint after years of correspondence with grace, should not be presented as attainable to any degree of heroic perfection, at least overnight. Such a mistake follows from the failure to understand that the road to holiness, even for the saints, had a historical beginning. They were not sanctified in the first instant of their existence (excluding, of course, the Virgin Mary), nor were they ever in that state of perfect maturity which they reached at the end of their lives. There is no need to stress that such presuppositions militate against the very purpose of hagiographical writing: that saints are people whose example can be followed. More than a few current biographers seem to have forgotten that the several effects of original sin were present even in the saints; hence a lack of emphasis on the slow and laborious nature of the pilgrimage to sanctity, even if it is not omitted altogether. There are other authors who are inclined to exaggerate the effects of original sin and to accentuate the weakness of human powers. In them we find an excessive insistence on mortification. This oscillation between opposite poles is normal enough. The task of reconciling grace and nature has exercised the Church's magisterium and her theologians from the first. Similarly in the field of hagiography, writers have run the gamut between horizontalism and verticalism in their manner of interpreting the lives, activity and spiritual profiles of the saints.

Usually it is not a question of explicit theological error, but rather a matter of tendencies and emphases which reveal theological ignorance or lack of precision. But when saints are presented primarily as 'signs' of God's omnipotence, 'miracles' of grace, or 'symbols' of the faith, there is bound to be a depreciation or a by-passing of the truth that here we have a person who has freely collaborated with prevenient, concomitant and crowning graces. Such hagiographies conceal a questionable teaching, one that is out of

touch with various elements of catholic truth, such as the operation of redemptive healing grace; and the implication is that human nature is entirely corrupt, so that any real co-operation on the part of man with his God is automatically excluded. On the other hand, there are examples in which original sin and its effects are dismissed altogether, to the point that the value of prayer and any form of asceticism is underplayed or ignored. In its place we are presented with an anthropology which takes no account of revelation, and thus degenerates into a false humanism and a totally unreal and pernicious optimism. Obviously in such an approach there can be no place for the fundamentals of christian holiness and particularly for the christocentric heroism of the saints themselves.

The fact of the matter is that God himself raises up saints in his Church not only for the fulfilment of a specific mission, but in order that the faithful, under the impulse of his grace, might be inspired by them and model their lives on one or other of them: and this because such a one brings to life in a visible and almost tangible way the ideal of a truly integrated christian existence, one that corresponds to their own state, vocation and aspirations. Hence incalculable damage can be inflicted by 'saints' lives' which are no more than means to inculcate, consciously or unconsciously, unhealthy or false teaching. It is not difficult to expose and to refute false doctrines which are presented as such. But when they are wrapped up in the biographies of the saints, it is a different question. Often enough the readers are not in a position to bring a critical judgment to bear on what they read, to distinguish the true from the false, the facts from their interpretation; nor have they sufficient theological background to uncover the erroneous tendencies concealed in such writing. (If anyone should feel that these dangers are exaggerated here, he need only consult the standard histories of spirituality to discover the power which 'the lives of the saints' have wielded in every generation on the minds of the faithful and thence on their manner of living the christian life.)

Equally, sound hagiographical writing can exercise a powerful influence in growth to spiritual maturity. The careful presentation of one who has lived a life so like our own, and yet given to Christ without reserve, has proven time and again to be the trigger of a new faith and hope in the divine mercy and grace, leading to that reverent affection which forms the basis of a truly loving relationship as long as life shall last.