

SANCTITY, IMAGES AND STORIES

By MARGARET PRESS

A FEW YEARS AGO I ATTENDED MASS in an Australian city church which served a parish largely composed of first-, second- or even third-generation Italians. They had brought with them their Catholicism from many regions of the Italian mainland and nearby islands. My attention kept wandering to one of the many life-sized statues of saints around the walls, all carefully enshrined in glass cases. Near me was a statue of what looked at first sight like Mercury, messenger of the gods, complete with winged heels and cap. Closer examination revealed a plaque bearing the name of a saint, precious to people of one region, but not familiar to others elsewhere.

As I went away, I reflected on that statue and the notion of inherited wisdom. Thousands of years ago, someone had created the image of an intermediary, believed to carry divine communications to other gods or to humans, who were thus spared the awesome experience of a personal encounter with the Divine. In Greek and Roman mythology, Hermes or Mercury had this role; it translated easily into a Christian context, and was given the persona of a local martyr or hero. It is much easier to receive a divine message when it is relayed by someone disarmingly close to our own life and location. Transcendence and immanence are both accounted for.

The anthropological, mythical creation of heroes and protectors seems to reveal a need in the human psyche for explanations, and for encouragement and help in dealing with the problems of survival, as well as the universal need to be cared for and loved. It is not surprising, therefore, that in succession to the ancient tales handed down, and in reverence for larger-than-life women and men, Christians too told stories of human yet heroic qualities in contemporaries. Those first Gentile converts had lived with the old gods and heroes and the divinities of the natural world. After all, Paul wrote of himself to his Roman converts: 'I am a debtor to both Greeks and barbarians' (Rom 1:14).

With the growth of Christianity, persecution brought new criteria for heroism. When someone like Perpetua or Cecilia or Ignatius of Antioch, for instance, died at the executioner's hands, other Christians

revered them immediately, and were inspired by their steadfast and courageous love for God, even to the extent of following them to martyrdom. At the same time stories of their lives and sufferings were circulated, gathering wonderful detail in the process. Fact and legend, as is always the case, coexisted, one springing from the other.

In later ages, when a man like Francis of Assisi died, the crowds who gathered to mourn him shouted their veneration, their verdict recording for ever that this wandering friar, founder and preacher, was so close to God and God's creation that death merely confirmed the proximity. Even today that kind of popular acclaim can happen, as witness the congregation in St Peter's Basilica claiming at his funeral mass that Pope John XXIII was indubitably a modern St John, or the confident assumption by the people of El Salvador that their assassinated archbishop is truly St Oscar Romero of the Americas.

Closer to home, I was reminded of these examples when a well-known Sydney ophthalmologist, Doctor Fred Hollows, died. He claimed to be agnostic and appeared to many as a rough-hewn character, but, driven by a powerful sense of compassion, he had given years of his life and specialist expertise to treating the blind and partially sighted among the most disadvantaged people in the north of Australia. He then turned to northern Africa, disregarding his own terminal illness, to train and inspire others to carry on that work. When he died, it was an avowed communist friend who reminded us that Fred was 'a people's saint', an accolade that was quoted by Bishop John Heaps, who officiated at the Hollows funeral. In an odd way, this example illustrates the elements of the historically developed process of canonization – a rare quality of charity in action, acclaim by peers, affirmation by a bishop. Fred Hollows' life story will probably never be submitted for consideration by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, but his patients and hundreds of contemporaries have made their own assessment.

Sanctity and sainthood

How are we to judge what sanctity means? Who are the saints? The one hundred and forty four thousand of the book of Revelation? The ten thousand listed in the Roman calendar? Is the number limited to the three or four hundred canonized by popes since the thirteenth century? Are all the saints Catholic, or will we find Albert Schweitzer somewhere near Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King as well as Miguel Pro among the one hundred and forty-four thousand?

Sanctity, saintliness, sainthood: these are abstract terms, pointing to a way of life, a status which is, for many of the people in the pews (or

outside them), awesome, if not downright frightening. They seem to belong to the stained-glass windows, pictures, sculptures, plaster statues in churches and art galleries. The general feeling is that to earn a statue you have to be a public figure, successful, deserving of honour. Yet theologians would say that to be *saintly* or *holy* is to have achieved wholeness, to have fulfilled the purpose for which each one is created.

A modern Orthodox theologian sees the concept of *saintliness* as the result of a series of creative tensions between 'heavenly revelation and earthly reflection, the divine initiative and the cosmic response. God's invitation and our vocation'.¹ He adds that, 'the saint is never separated from but is at the very heart of the world', a symbol of separation and integration alike. A saint's life will always be a model to be admired; at the same time, it will be marked by human weaknesses, locating the saint firmly among the people of their time. Saints-in-the-street are recognized and honoured in their own cultures; a regional *fama sanctitatis* is created when someone breaks through the mores of their times by living, and sometimes dying, as Christ's gospel teaches. These are the Dietrich Bonhoeffers, the Steve Bikos or Dag Hammarskjölds of our own times, the essence of whose appeal lies in their very humanness.

Sainthood, however – a much more esoteric status – is the ecclesiastical declaration which guarantees that this person is with God, is empowered to intercede for others and may be universally honoured. Concerning the lives of such people, Rahner and Vorgrimler define *sainthood*: '... canonised saints are the creative models of sanctity, who have set a concrete example, each for his [*sic*] own particular age, of a new way to be Christian, and so have shown others how to accept Christianity creatively and with new understanding'.² So, canonized saints have responded individually and creatively, as Chryssavgis writes, in their own times and places. They have then been recognized, honoured and ultimately put forward officially as examples for the whole Church, the matter having been clinched by miracles, incidents recognized as God's response to the saint's intercession.

Political?

The process of local recognition and honour, as well as the central, institutional declaration, places the subject of *saintliness* and *sainthood* on the larger canvas of human life at any given time. If, as Bernard Crick claims,³ a political system is one in which all humans work out how to recognize and tolerate diversity, and to respect the dignity and rights of others, then the processes of beatification and canonization are

always political within the diversity of the Church. The surge of local devotion, the recognition that a saint is somehow different, comes from the base of the hierarchical pyramid. The ultimate decision by the pope to present another saint to the world is another means of working out an appropriate way of Christian living in the current period of history.

The cautious, formalized procedure, minutely monitored and documented at every stage, held within the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints, is juridical in character. While one main source of evidence required is a well-documented biography, along with writings of proven orthodoxy, the emphasis is on proof of heroic practice of the theological and cardinal virtues, in accordance with the norms which have been developed within the Congregation. Presented in a *positio*, or document compiled in collaboration with the accepted presenter of the cause (*relator*), the evidence for sainthood inevitably emphasizes virtue, and paints faults in lighter shades. Strong treatment is reserved for those who have opposed the candidate, pointing up the contrast between the parties. Its purpose is to convince the experts. The judgement made by the cardinals of the Congregation goes forward to the pope, who makes the final decision.

The process of suggesting that a person with a reputation for holiness be officially recognized may have been begun by her or his supporters: for example St Thérèse of Lisieux was put forward by her Carmelite order, Blessed José María Escrivá by his Opus Dei followers, and Blessed Mary of the Cross MacKillop by her Josephite sisters and the Australian bishops. The process ends with the pontiff, who makes the announcement to the world that this woman, man or group is worthy of honour. But the motives of the parties involved may be, and frequently are, complex and divergent. The petitioners may have had one set of aims in having their candidate so honoured: to win wider approval for a religious order, to share the wonder of a life lived or lost in the service of God. The papal declaration has its own agenda, which has over the centuries varied, according to the aims of the pope at the time, and the current social and political circumstances.

For example, in 1970 when Paul VI canonized the Forty English Martyrs of recusant times, it was a way of declaring support for human rights today in the particular way reserved to the papacy. Four hundred years after Pius V had excommunicated Queen Elizabeth I, Paul VI declared that this act of canonization of the English martyrs not only asserted the principle of the primacy of conscience, but pointed to their steadfast faith, charity and forgiveness of their torturers. These qualities are especially relevant in a modern world only too aware of the

violent oppression of dissidents by some states, in disregard of human dignity and freedom.

The canonization of some monarchs, aristocrats and popes in the Middle Ages was seen as a validation of their life's work. Thomas à Becket was venerated as champion of the Church against usurping monarchs. As the once powerful Chancellor of England, Thomas More took a stand for conscience against his king's demands; any earlier ambition, hardness or expediency on his part was erased by his calm and heroic death. In the area of church-state relations today, on the other hand, as Kenneth Woodward observes,⁴ the decision to declare a person a saint is sometimes halted by political sensitivity to the situation in countries like Mexico, or in European nations where totalitarian regimes are still to be found.

Although canonization takes a message to the universal Church, beatification often affirms and encourages the people of a particular region. John Paul II is a travelling pope and likes to give to the Christians of a particular country a model of their own: martyrs for and from Japan and Africa, for example; or, as on his most recent visit to these parts of the southern hemisphere, a catechist in Papua New Guinea, Peter To Rot; a priest in Sri Lanka, Joseph Vaz; and a nun in Australia. Beatification can be declared by the local bishop, but by personally presenting each chosen individual the pope reinforces the purpose of the Church, expressed in the liturgy:

In their lives on earth you give us an example.
 In our communion with them you give us their friendship.
 In their prayer for the church you give us strength and protection.
 This great company of witnesses spurs us on . . .⁵

So, whether in the wider sense of popular recognition and accommodation of diversity, or the pursuit of particular aims by a pontiff, it seems that there is a political aspect to the promotion, conferring or publicizing of sainthood.

'As an Australian'

Although Australia has been inhabited for tens of thousands of years, European settlement is a little over two hundred years old. It is impossible to live in Australia and not be aware of distance from the older eastern and western civilizations. Distance and climate, as well as physical features, have created something special. The poet James McAuley wrote that he was 'fitted to the land as the soul is to the body'.

Where once was the sea is now a salty sunken desert,
 a futile heart within a fair periphery:
 the people are hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside them,
 the men are independent, but you could not call them free.

A harsh vision of a land and its people – who are likely to appreciate those who have shared the hard living of pioneering times and places.

One such person was Mary MacKillop, who declared, 'I am an Australian', in her correspondence with the Cardinal Secretary for the Propagation of the Faith in the course of her struggle with some of the local bishops to preserve the autonomy of her new Australian order. Her claim to Australian identity was made despite her Scottish family and the fact that the federation of the various colonies had not yet come about. In 1995 the Pope paid a whirlwind visit to Australia to declare blessed Mother Mary of the Cross MacKillop.

With a relatively small population, still less than twenty million, Australia likes to win in competition with the older, more populous nations. For many Australians, Mary MacKillop was a winner, the first in the nation's history to be put forward as a candidate for beatification and to pass all the stringent examinations. A strong yet homely woman, helper of the disadvantaged, migrant, woman, nun – many of those on the fringe of established social groups today find something in her story to appeal to their experience, just as her goodness shone out to people of her own times.

The complex interplay of hierarchical and popular conceptions of saints, of sanctity and sainthood, was vividly illustrated at the beatification celebrations of Mary MacKillop. Speaking to the Josephite gathering at morning prayer in St Mary's Cathedral and again, later in the day, during the beatification ceremony, Pope John Paul made known his agenda: Mother Mary is to be seen as a model of 'interior freedom and spiritual maturity'; the Church must 'find fresh and creative ways of recognising and integrating the specific charisms of women'. He made the comparison: 'the holiness demanded by the Gospel is as Australian as she was Australian', reminding everyone of the contrasting peoples and cultures, which make 'a marvellous blend of old and new . . .' He reminded everyone that Mary was a loyal, faithful daughter of the Church. This was the pope's voice. Not only was he following his custom of reminding everyone of gospel values, but also emphasizing some of his own convictions about women's role in the work of the Church. Mother Mary is model for both, he said.

What of the voice of the people, the local honour paid to her? A quarter of a million people gathered in Sydney for the beatification

ceremony, most of whom were at least as interested in Mary MacKillop as in the pope himself. They had come from every state in Australia, as well as from New Zealand, since her work had touched those places, in small bush convents and schools, as well as in the less affluent parts of towns and cities.

With the help of Father Julian Tenison Woods, a creative and eccentric genius, she adapted the notion, borrowed from a rural French order, of local women living in small cottage convents, conducting classes for children in country areas. In the scattered settlement pattern of nineteenth-century Australia, they developed the notion of forming an educational system, to be extended to rural and urban schools and other caring institutions in every state. While her cause for beatification was in progress – and it took many years, from 1925 to 1994 – a network therefore existed for her reputation to be widespread. Publicity and prayer went hand in hand, since all over Australia and New Zealand are to be found convents, schools and ex-students of the Josephite sisters who owned Blessed Mary MacKillop as their founder and inspiration. Nationwide interest followed on naturally to the ultimate decision of Pope John Paul to visit Australia and name her among the blessed. The young woman whose miraculous cure in 1946 had been recognized as a miracle won by Mother Mary's intercession was present, although anonymously, at the Randwick ceremony. Whatever the Pope's message, there was little doubt that at least one aim of the petitioners had been achieved – validation of the order of Josephite sisters of which Mother Mary was co-founder.

The process which had been followed was an example of the juridical approach now in favour. The *positio* or biographical data had been presented by a most experienced and astute *relator*, Peter Gumpel SJ, who oversaw its preparation by an Australian collaborator, Paul Gardiner SJ. The third volume of this work, entitled *Informatio de virtutibus*, sharpens and clarifies the content of the previous two volumes, and it is here that one is reminded of the juridical norms by which Mary MacKillop's life was to be judged. There is evidence, presented by defending counsel; opposition is mercilessly scrutinized. Try as one may to promote human weakness as part of the candidate's reality, faults are buried under the sheer weight of positive testimony, each hint of weakness being accounted for by a worthy motive.

For instance, Mary herself confessed to a lack of candidness in speech, preferring to write letters. This accounts for the huge archival collection of her correspondence to persons who were sometimes in the same town or city, like the bishops in Adelaide, or to people further

away, such as Monsignor Tobias Kirby in Rome. Could this quality be linked to her lifelong refusal to name the harshness or injustice of her opponents and to expect the same behaviour of the sisters? For the modern reader, to call Bishop Matthew Quinn 'noble and generous' while he was thundering away against her to Roman authorities could look like hypocrisy, except that Mary claimed the precedent of an uncomplaining, peaceful Christ.

Again, it is not surprising that doubts were raised about her apparent lack of financial wisdom, given her father's reputation for inability to deal with money matters. Both she and Julian Woods had complete trust that Divine Providence would come to the rescue if they spent beyond their means; she incurred considerable debt in the name of the order. This might be judged to be improvidence, except that she insisted on strict frugality in the name of the vow of poverty, something which both she and Woods had always insisted upon. If these were ordinary, human flaws in Mary MacKillop, they help to account for the description of her by an old man who spoke to me last year. He remembers well the nice old sister in a wheelchair, whom he and the other seven-year-old children liked to hear tell stories in their playground. His impression? 'She was just ordinary, but we liked her,' he declared. It is this ordinariness to which many have warmed.

Once on the fringe of society herself, Mary MacKillop has been adopted by the refugee people of East Timor as a patroness. The spokesman for Aboriginal people, speaking to the pope before the beatification mass, called Mary 'the Ancestral Mother and pretty little angel',⁶ uniting metaphors from his culture and ours. The contrast was heightened as he stood at the top of steps, formal in business suit, while his young son sat below with two other didgeridoo players, sending a powerful, primitive music to herald the papal ceremony.

Aboriginal features were incorporated into the liturgy, too. All this emphasizes that this woman, whose heroic practice of the Christian virtues places her among those allowed by the Church to be specially venerated, was also close enough to the Australian way of life to be owned by Australians as inspiration, example, friend, strength, and protector – as the prayers of the mass describe. No wonder that a journalist, reporting on the beatification for *The Tablet*, called it 'arguably the most significant religious event in Australia in the past two hundred years'.⁷ National pride warms to claims like that.

Stories and legends

Saints are surrounded by ambivalent attitudes. The tension between sanctity and sainthood is one factor; another becomes apparent in the

ways their life-stories are recorded. Even if the Church makes many saints, how realistic is it to expect that we will find in them friends, protectors, inspiration? Is our faith and/or piety likely to be nourished? The manner in which their stories are recorded must surely be a factor in their acceptability as well as the times in which the stories are received.

Criteria have changed as the centuries have rolled away. As is discussed in the extensive research of Hippolyte Delahaye SJ,⁸ credibility, scepticism, imagination and factual data all play a part. In pre-Christian times, the Scriptures had already embellished historical figures like Jonah with aspects of some famous legends. The apocryphal gospels and martyr stories wove imaginative wonders around real people, Jesus and Mary included. Today, our ways of reading saints' lives have changed, as have standards of research and presentation. Contemporary readers of serious works are likely to have moved towards a critical stance, if not as far as deconstruction. If the lives of saintly people have become more complex, so have the stories themselves, part of a vast literary output. Those books which continue the tradition of recording only what is edifying, meeting the curial expectations or orthodoxy, perfection and popular veneration, are no longer the norm. Other, well-researched and objectively presented biographies like Peter Hebblethwaite's *Pope John XXIII* and Monica Furlong's *Thérèse of Lisieux*, as well as the gently insightful stories of legendary women by Sara Maitland, have taken their places on the public stands, beside the older varieties.

Another source of ambivalence regarding saints is the diversity of modern society. The vast array of women and men who have been placed before us is more than matched by the diversity of people who receive their stories. Those stories may have been heard at home, in school or in church. Pictures, statues, pilgrimages and processions may have impressed them on the memory. A whole range of attitudes is seen in every church congregation in a multi-cultural country like Australia, with an ancient aboriginal tradition existing beside a comparatively recent European heritage and a still more recent Asian component. In any church one sees worshippers visiting the statue of Mary or of a favourite saint, touching it for reassurance or leaving a candle to represent their concerns. During church renovations it is common for whole groups of parishioners to demand that their favourite statues be left in place. Yet others could not name the saints who are depicted in windows or other images, and feel no need to extend their prayer beyond the liturgy and the honour they pay to God and, maybe, God's

mother. As well as those denominations which do not subscribe to the calendar of saints at all, this country has a large, secular, post-Christian culture beyond the regular church-goers. When I pointed out to a young businessman last year the preparations being made at Randwick race-course to accommodate the beatification ceremony of Mary McKillop, his response (and this after weeks of media saturation) was: 'Mary who?'

What place therefore has veneration of saints, canonized or not, in the spiritual life of today's Christians? While the sceptics and cynics find little that is credible or attractive, worthy of contemplation or of emulation, there are many who acknowledge a need for heroes and legends, as well as for hard evidence of extraordinary goodness, courage and leadership. For the non-believer, heroes are created by media coverage of the individuals who star in sport, entertainment, royal families or military exploits. Television and the print media reach millions of homes and people who see their lives as colourless, who need to be encouraged by the images of heroes soaring above the ordinariness of life. Legends and myths grow out of the need to have the spirit lifted, ignoring the heroic one's faults or flaws and selecting positive features which are significant at a given moment. National as well as religious myths grow in this way, in response to something deep in the human psyche. As Paul VI said, we need models for confronting oppressive regimes, for treasuring the dignity and rights of the dispossessed and deprived, for daring to contradict current values. The stories are treasured as long as that need remains.

The life-stories of founders like Mother Mary have to be as credible as the rules of life which they hand on, their spirituality valid for each succeeding generation. Those generations then must be able to discern qualities which are timeless, like Mary's loyalty, which Pope John Paul pointed to – a loyalty which extended beyond church authorities to her sisters, family, and even to the estranged Julian Woods. Like gold prospectors, we have to shake away the surrounding debris so as to uncover the specks of gold. Maybe, like any group of children needing encouragement, as children of God we need someone recognizably like us, yet also powerful, to whom we can come for help.

NOTES

¹ J. Chrysavgis, 'The making of saints: an Orthodox reflection on the beatification of Mary MacKillop', *Australasian Catholic Record* (January 1995), pp 33–43.

² Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Concise theological dictionary*, second edition (London, 1983), p 525.

- ³ cf B. Crick, *In defence of politics* (Penguin Books, 1986), p 15f.
- ⁴ K. Woodward, *Making saints* (London, 1991), e.g. p 152 ff.
- ⁵ Preface of Holy Men and Women I, in *The Roman missal*.
- ⁶ Aidan Ridgeway, Randwick, 19 January 1995.
- ⁷ Chris McGillon, *The Tablet*, 28 January 1995.
- ⁸ H. Delahaye SJ, *Legends of the Saints* (Longman, 1907).