

Saint Chesterton?

[Review of] *The Holiness of G.K. Chesterton*, edited by William Oddie (Gracewing: Leominster [U.K.] 2010).

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

GLANCE at any catalogue of saints and you will be struck at how few of them were married. There are Mary and Joseph, of course, but their situation was hardly typical. Among other married saints, women outnumber men. The Roman matron Perpetua and her slave Felicity were martyrs, but their husbands—like Mr. Clitherow whose wife, Margaret, was martyred by Elizabeth I in 1586—were not. Augustine’s mother, Monica, is a saint but not his father, Patricius. Then there are Melanie the elder, Paula, and Marcella of fourth-century Rome, all widows who, like Jane Frances de Chantel, Marie of the Incarnation, and Marguerite d’Youville, embraced the ascetical life when their familial obligations had, more or less, come to an end. Married male saints who were not martyrs—or Apostlesⁱ—tend to be rulers: Good King Wenceslaus, Louis IX of France, the Emperor Henry II and, in the Eastern Church, Constantine the Great. Orthodoxy also honours the patriarchs: Saints Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel. Most of the saints, however, have been either martyrs or ascetics. This historical fact accounts for the small number of married saints. To see why, one has to consider the meaning and form of sainthood in the early Church.

Martyrs were known to be already in heaven. Their imitation of Christ was so complete that they were believed to have achieved the fullness of what Jesus had implicitly promised to his heroic disciples when he told the good thief, “this day you will be with me in paradise.”ⁱⁱ Ignatius of Antioch, writing early in the second century, captures the attitude well: “I give injunctions to all men, that I am dying willingly for God’s sake. . . . I am God’s wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread of Christ. . . . Then shall I be truly a disciple of Jesus Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ

With the end of persecution in the fourth century, another mode of heroic discipleship was recognized in asceticism. Jerome was typical of many in describing this austere and consecrated way of life as a new form of martyrdom, which could, in its protracted demands, equal or even surpass physical martyrdom. In his eulogy of Saint Paula he addresses her daughter Eustochium: “Your mother has now after a long martyrdom won her crown. It is not only the shedding of blood that is accounted a confession:^{iv} the spotless service of a devout mind is itself a daily martyrdom.”^v A monk or a nun, having died symbolically on his entry into the monastery, was regarded as living in heaven. Those who were spectacularly successful in meeting the demands of this radical form of Christian life—Saint Martin of Tours (d. 397),^{vi} for instance—were canonized at first by being honoured by the people; later, during the Middle Ages a formal process was instituted by the Church, the first recorded instance being Pope John XV’s canonization in A.D. 993 of Ulrich, Bishop of Ausburg.^{vii}

This bit of history makes clear why few married people have been canonized. Family obligations made martyrdom, on the one hand, inadvisable and monasticism, on

the other, impossible. The conviction was that lay people lived in the temporal order where their vocations were tested, while martyrs and monastics, in one way or another, had attained the “angelic life.”^{viii} Canonization was simply the recognition of what had been achieved. Hence Cardinal Carter’s off-quoted comment, that he did “not think that we are sufficiently emancipated from certain concepts of sanctity”^{ix} to contemplate canonizing Chesterton.

The official recognition of holy activists, such as Saint Francis or Saint Dominic, however, signalled a change in the understanding of heroic sanctity. Of neither could it be said that he had symbolically died and gone to heaven, for they were very much part of the Church Militant. Monastic seclusion and “stability”—i.e., the vow to remain in one monastery until death—were put aside in favour of what we would call the apostolate. Sanctity was achieved by a spiritual service of society at large. Once such service is accepted as a sign of heroic virtue, it follows that many married men and women of today, and also single persons, are saints, for the paradox of our time is that being Catholic in society can require a break with the world as absolute in its way as that made by any ascetic. To be faithful to the Gospel can demand of the laity, and especially of those in the public eye, a heroic sacrifice of self, well beyond what is required in most current forms of religious life. Poverty, ridicule, expulsion: such are the lot of people who would live by the Gospel, and the “poor of the Lord” now comprise many couples and single people who in loneliness and distress have learned to depend solely upon God. This dependence can be a harrowing school of sanctity, which should be recognized by the Church as a prophetic witness in our times. The example and prayers of such saints are needed, and canonization is the appropriate way to assure that they are available to the Church, as some already have been. Saint Gianna Beretta Molla, a wife and mother who in 1962 gave her life that her child might live, was canonized on 16 May 2004; Louis and Zélie Martin, the parents of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, were beatified on 20 October 2008. Frédéric Ozanam, the unmarried layman who founded the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 22 August 1997. And Chesterton?

The essays collected in *The Holiness of G. K. Chesterton*, delivered originally as papers at an Oxford conference in 2009, support Chesterton’s cause. As persuasive as they are, they left me undecided. If canonization simply means that the candidate is surely in heaven, Chesterton certainly qualifies, but so does my grandmother. But if heroic virtue—as in martyrdom, as in mysticism, as in asceticism—is the test, the bar is raised considerably. Our authors are aware of this fact. Two of the essays, for instance, by Nicholas Madden and Bob Wild, raise the question “Was Chesterton a Mystic?” Father Wild’s pleasing, colloquial paper has no trouble identifying full-fledged mysticism in Chesterton: “an immediate awareness of the Presence in and through created reality” (p. 91). Father Madden, a Carmelite, by placing his discussion in the mystical tradition of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, is more cautious . . . and convincing. He notes the danger of reducing the content of the word “mystic” to the vanishing point, in a way reminiscent of C.S. Lewis’s comment about “gentleman”:

The word *gentleman* originally meant something recognisable; one who had a coat of arms and some landed property. . . . A *gentleman*, once it has been spiritualised and refined out of its old coarse, objective sense, means hardly more

than a man whom the speaker likes. As a result, *gentleman* is now a useless word.^x

Thus Karl Rahner's generalizing approach—"everyday mysticism" (p. 73)—is critically examined and found wanting. The psychologist Karl Stern makes the point in his description of "natural" mysticism:

[T]here are precocious mystics, very much as there are precocious musicians or precocious mathematicians. Guardini speaks of "religiously talented" people. It is highly probably that there is, on the natural plane, a gift for mysticism as there is a gift for playing chess.^{xi}

Father Madden is well aware of Chesterton's profound insight into the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Francis and Saint Bonaventure; he also comments briefly on poetry as a vehicle for the mystic. Nevertheless, he concludes: ". . . the little Spaniard [John of the Cross] would seem to have something which we do not necessarily find in the genial Englishman, a *no sé qué* which by common consent is called mysticism" (p. 87)

Pope Benedict XVI, in his general audience of 12 January 2011, called attention to the fact that true mysticism inevitably reveals itself in an effective love of neighbour:

We must not forget that the more we love God and are constant in prayer, the more we will truly love those who are around us, those who are close to us, because we will be able to see in every person the face of the Lord, who loves without limits or distinctions. Mysticism does not create distances with others; it does not create an abstract life, but brings one closer to others because one begins to see and act with the eyes, with the heart of God.

It is tempting to reverse the logic to conclude that the love of neighbour must have a mystical origin. In other words, his well-known genius for friendship may be proof that there was a mystical element in Chesterton's experience. Perhaps so, but it must also be noted that for most of his life Chesterton was not a Catholic, i.e., he did not enjoy the sacramental graces that form the basis of authentic mystical experience in the Church.

The other essays, in one way or another, focus on the question of Chesterton's heroic sanctity. Sheridan Gilley, "The Journalist as Saint," points out that Saint Francis de Sales, the current patron, hardly qualifies as a journalist at all, whereas Chesterton supplies what one looks for in a patron saint: "an example and a correction to his profession to a degree suggesting heroic sanctity" (p. 103). Most of the paper, however, is devoted to the range and brilliance of Chesterton's journalism, which, as a standard of excellence, might be equally applied to Charles Dickens, say, or Joseph Mitchell. Admittedly, neither of them had the range of Chesterton's social criticism which was based upon a commitment to Catholicism that infuses especially his later works, but in this he is not essentially different from, say, the great Catholic historian Christopher Dawson—whose cause is *not* being advanced. Gilley's argument is finally based upon the pitiful state of journalism in Chesterton's day, and even more so in our own, which cries for some sort of heavenly intervention: "No profession is so important; no

profession is in greater need of sanctity. But if the Church needs a patron of journalism, to stand above her altars, then the greatest of these is Chesterton” (p. 123). In other words, if you want a *journalist* canonized Chesterton is the only possible candidate.

John Saward, “Chesterton’s Sanctity,” finds Chesterton heroically holy in his humility, drawing a parallel between his childlike simplicity and the little way of Saint Thérèse which, as Scripture teaches and the magisterium has confirmed, is an essential element of Christian piety. But in his exposition of Chesterton’s humility, and then of his sound reasoning about suicide and his appreciation of sacramental confession, Father Saward seems to have forgotten that to think rightly on these topics is not in itself heroic. To invoke my sainted grandmother, again, she was as sound as Chesterton in these matters.

Father Ian Boyd amusingly once pointed out that the greatest obstacle to Chesterton’s canonization is the sheer size of his literary remains. Pity the poor panel in the Vatican examining his cause, having to finish their lives before they finish their reading. One can but marvel, therefore, at the thorough acquaintance these articles exhibit with the ocean of material Chesterton left behind. Not surprisingly, the editor, William Oddie, in his introduction and also in his appendix on Chesterton’s “philosemitism” shines in this regard. The latter, a wide-ranging survey of Chestertoniana, is a resounding refutation of Adam Gopnik’s scurrilous attack published in *The New Yorker* in July 2008. In his “Introduction” Oddie similarly musters an impressive army of texts to support his claim that Chesterton was heroic in his exercise of the virtues of faith, hope and charity. That should be sufficient, but Oddie also implicitly recommends a return to the methods by which saints were recognized in the early church, *viz.*, canonization by popular acclaim, along the lines of the “*santo subito!*” chanted by the multitudes that gathered for the funeral of John Paul II. The opening lines of the “Introduction” summon as witness the maid of a house Chesterton used to visit: “Oh, Miss, our Mr Chesterton dying—he was a sorter saint Miss, wasn’t he?” (p.1). The paradox continues today, in that Chesterton continues to enjoy immense popularity among ordinary people—including his fellow journalists—while he is completely neglected by the intelligentsia, unless, of course, they happen to need an anti-Semite man of straw.

Two remarkable papers remain to be commented on, by Ian Ker and Aidan Nicols, O.P. Father Ker’s “Humour ad Holiness in Chesterton” seems doomed from the start, as hilarity of any sort has almost always been regarded with suspicion in the annals of sanctity. Thus Sulpicius Severus, in documenting the sanctity of Saint Martin, says, “No one ever saw him enraged, or excited, or lamenting, or laughing.”^{xii} Or, as Chesterton himself said, “What a consolation in a world weary of laughter, are people who do not laugh.”^{xiii} But what fuelled Chesterton’s humour was not ridicule or condescension; it was the gap between man as he views himself and man as he is. It’s reminiscent of Newman’s great passage on Original Sin in the *Apologia*: “the greatness and littleness of man.” The comic aspect of existence is never closer to the surface than it is in an egotist, with his preening and absurd self-importance: “The most deadly moral danger is the danger of egotism and spiritual pride” (p. 44). Hence Chesterton’s was neither the *fou rire* of the nihilist nor the sneer of the snob but the shared laughter of co-conspirators in the adventure of humanity, and of all the butts of Chesterton’s jokes there was none greater than himself: “The truth is that all genuine appreciations rests on a

certain mystery of humility” (p. 45), i.e., Ker succeeds in convincing us that Chesterton’s humility was “heroic” (p. 51): Q.E.D.

Father Nicols goes a step beyond canonizing Chesterton by anticipating his being declared a doctor of the Church, and that in two senses: first, in the usual sense that his writings would be beneficial to all Catholics, and secondly that they have something profound to say about the Church itself. Nicols is right, of course, but as his own summary of Chesterton’s ideas—“ecclesiology” would be here too elevated a term—indicates, there is little or no theology to be found in them. Chesterton may have been the greatest apologist for the Church since Pascal, but, theologically speaking, he was nothing more. It’s as if Newman’s writings all were variations on *The Present Position of Catholics in England*. Even so, given the tenor of today’s society, it may well be that apologetics is what we need:

In a difficult age of the Church such as our own, when the invidious choice is often between, on the one hand, the vague and woolly whose religion is hardly more than humanism with a spiritual tinge, and, on the other, cribbed and cramped *zelanti*, [Chesterton] is surely the apologist-doctor of the hour (p. 69).

It will be clear that, even after reading *The Holiness of G.K. Chesterton*, I am ambivalent about canonizing Chesterton. To be honest, my prejudice against doing so is based on the conviction that I cannot imagine him performing a miracle. Why would a man who saw a miracle in every aspect of creation think it worthwhile to interrupt the scheme of things in some self-serving, ostentatious manner? Furthermore, as Father Nicols observes, “he probably regarded a detailed interest in ecclesiastical affairs on the part of laymen as a telltale sign of incipient lunacy” (p. 60). G.K.C. would be happy to leave the internal business of the Church in clerical hands. But then, perhaps, given the vagaries of the “age of the laity,” that is after all the saint we need.

I may note that the editing leaves something to be desired in shifting conventions and some ungrammatical writing.

ⁱ Cf. Mark 1:30.

ⁱⁱ Luke 23:43.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans*, 4.

^{iv} The word “martyrdom” literally means confessing—i.e., professing—one’s faith publicly.

^v Letter 108.32.

^{vi} Cf. Sulpicius Severus, *Epistola* II: “. . . [Martin] fully attained to the honour of martyrdom without shedding his blood. For what agonies of human sufferings did he not endure in the hope of eternal life?” Also Saint Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, 46-47: “[Antony] longed to suffer martyrdom. . . . When at last the persecution ceased . . . Antony departed, and again withdrew to his cell, and was there daily a martyr.”

^{vii} The date of the first formal canonization requires a correction to footnote 5 on page 91: for “Benedict IV” (d. 903) read “Benedict XIV” (d. 1850).

^{viii} Cf. Matthew 22:30.

^{ix} *Passim* in *Holiness*. . . .

^x C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Collins: London, 1952), p. 10.

^{xi} Karl Stern, “St. Thérèse of Lisieux,” *Saints for Now*, edited by Claire Booth Luce (Sheed & Ward: New York, 1952), p. 263; this book was reissued by Ignatius Press in 1993.

^{xiii} *Life of Martin*, 27. One could multiply such statements; cf. *Rule of Saint Benedict*, 7: “The tenth degree of humility is that [the monk] be not ready and quick to laugh, for it is written, ‘The fool lifts up his voice in laughter’ (Eccles 21:23)”.

^{xiii} G.K. Chesterton, *The Surprise*, The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton, vol. 11, edited by Denis J. Conlon (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1989), p. 318.