

## PARISH PRIESTS, BEATIFIED AND CANONIZED

IN Henri Ghéon's *Secret of the Curé d'Ars* we read the following statement: "M. Vianney was terrified to learn that in the long roll of the ages not a single parish-priest had been raised to the Church's altars as a saint. Popes had been canonized, cardinals, bishops, religious and laymen; but of parish-priests not one; not the shadow of one. The melancholy inference was that there was no condition in the whole world in which sanctity was more difficult to attain." (*Translated and ed.* Sheed & Ward, p. 123.)

This statement is not merely a depressing one, but, if true, a disturbing one to clergy and laity alike. As a matter of historical fact we hope to show that it is an extremely inaccurate one. Who makes the statement? Not Ghéon, he records it. Not the Curé, he learnt it; but whether orally or by reading we are not told.

In the first place, what exactly is meant by the office of parish-priest? Surely nothing else than the charge or, to use the canonical term, the cure of souls in a defined district. In this sense parish-priests have existed since the peace given to the Church by Constantine in the fourth century; possibly as early as the third century in the comparatively long gaps between the persecutions. What is meant by "being raised to the Church's altars as a saint"? Does explicit or even tacit approval of a saint's cult by the Holy See suffice? If the author of the statement insists on confining his phrase "raised to the altars" to formal canonization by the Holy See, then he weakens his argument drawn from the canonization of Popes and Cardinals; for only two of the seventy-five Popes who find places in the calendar of the Church have been canonized by actual process, namely St. Celestine V and St. Pius V, whilst one, St. Gregory VII, received equivalent canonization; and of Cardinals, although a number have had their cult permitted by the Holy See for certain provinces, dioceses, or religious orders, few have been formally canonized, namely SS. Peter Damian, Warin, Charles Borromeo, Robert Bellarmine, and our own beloved country-

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man St. John Fisher. Another martyr of the Sacred College, St. Albert, Bishop of Liége, slain in defence of the rights of the Church in 1192, has his feast kept at Liége on November 21st, on which day he is commemorated in the Roman Martyrology; but he has never been officially canonized.

Many bishops who lived before the days of formal canonization have their places in the Roman Martyrology, and many have been raised to the altars in the last nine centuries. Of a number of these it is undoubtedly true to say that they were living saints whilst still holding the lesser rank of parish-priests. Some religious orders can count their canonized and beatified sons in hundreds, and the total number of religious saints must run into thousands, but it is doubtful if more than a few hundreds, if as many, have been formally canonized. What is of interest to note, as bearing some significance on the question, is the number of religious saints who found either the beginning or the fulness of their sanctity in acting as parish-priests. An excellent example is found in the life of St. Peter Fourier, a Canon Regular, canonized by Pope Leo XIII in 1897. As a religious he was given charge of the parish of Mattaincourt, in which position he was a model of all the pastoral virtues, being filled with love of the poor, solicitude for sinners, and with the spirit of prayer. He was styled "the Good Father of Mattaincourt." He was afterwards General of his Congregation of Canons Regular of Our Saviour, of which he was the founder, and died in 1649. The Dominican, John of Cologne, one of the Martyrs of Gorcum canonized by Pope Pius IX in 1867, was, at the time of his arrest, acting as parish-priest of Hornar in Holland, and two of his fellow-martyrs, St. Adrian Becanus and St. James Lacop, both Premonstratensians, were respectively parish-priest and curate of Munster in the same district. St. Dominic, the founder of the Friars Preachers, is said to have acted for some time as parish-priest of Fanjeaux in the south of France.

There are not a few instances of men entering a religious order after already attaining a high degree of sanctity as parish-priests. St. John of Sahugun after his ordination in 1445 was made Canon of Burgos and presented to several

benefices; but his conscience disturbed him to such an extent that he surrendered all but the poorest of them, which he served with the greatest fidelity, saying Mass daily, a matter for admiration in those times, and preaching and catechizing assiduously. We are told that his personal sanctity produced a complete reformation in the city of Salamanca wherein his little parish lay. After a dangerous operation he took the habit of the Augustinians, but continued to labour assiduously for souls. In 1479 he died from the effects of poison administered to him by an abandoned woman whose paramour he had converted. He was canonized in 1690, and his feast is kept in the Roman Martyrology on June 12th, as a double, but at Salamanca, where he is the principal patron, as a feast of the first class. In 1132 the parish-priest of Gargrave near Leeds joined the Cistercians and became Abbot of Newminster near Morpeth. He died on June 7th, 1159, and under the name of St. Robert of Newminster his feast is kept in his order on that day. One more example will suffice, that of Blessed Gonsalvo of Amaranthe, a Dominican whose cult was approved by Pope Pius IV in 1560. He was parish-priest of Riva de Vizella in Portugal in the thirteenth century, and left his parish in charge of his nephew, a priest, whilst he went on pilgrimage. His legend tells us he was absent fourteen years, and on his return, perhaps over-optimistically claimed his parish; but his undutiful nephew set the dogs on him, mistaking, or pretending to mistake, him for a tramp. Gonsalvo meekly accepted this rebuff and settled himself as a hermit until Our Lady appeared and directed him to enter the newly founded order of Dominicans. After his profession he returned to his hermitage, where he died in the odour of sanctity on January 10th, about 1259.

These cases however do not really answer the difficulty, for it would seem from the phrasing of the statement that the reproach, if it be such, is made against the Secular clergy; and how unfairly we will now try to show. What has already been said may have done something to dispel "the melancholy inference that there was no condition in the whole world in which sanctity was more difficult to attain," and

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the following instances of priests who have been canonized, beatified, or possess an approved cult will be sufficient proof. We cannot hope to give anything like a complete list of those priests in charge of souls who through "the long roll of the ages" laid down their lives for the Faith and for the sheep entrusted to their care. This list must be very great, including as it must the majority of the priests slain during the Roman and other persecutions, a list that is daily being added to in unhappy Spain.

England can well be proud of two beatified parish-priests put to death under Henry VIII, Blessed John Hale, parish-priest of Isleworth, martyred in 1535, and John Larke, parish-priest of Chelsea, executed at Tyburn in 1544. St. Thomas More, who as Lord Chancellor had presented him to this benefice, was also one of his parishioners and frequent server of his Mass. It speaks much for the holiness of his life that St. Thomas should choose him for his own parish. Four of the nineteen glorious martyrs slain at Gorcum by the Dutch Calvinists on July 9th, 1572, were secular priests, St. Leonard van Wieckel, parish-priest of Gorcum, with his curate, St. Nicholas Poppel, St. Anthony Wouters, parish priest of Heinot near Dortrecht, and St. Godfrey Duynen, an old man of seventy, in charge of a small parish in Gorcum. St. Anthony had for a long period lived a life of open scandal, but atoned for his crimes by a steadfast refusal to betray his faith amidst excruciating tortures. St. Godfrey, we have said, was advanced in years and when he and his companions were led away to martyrdom some of the bystanders urged his release, saying he was a doting old man. The reply they received was that if he had head enough to say Mass he had head enough to be hanged, and hanged he was with the rest of the glorious band.

Amongst the martyred parish-priests must be mentioned two who suffered death in defence of the seal of Confession, St. John Nepomucene and Blessed John Sarkander. After severe tortures followed by the most flattering promises of riches and dignities, John Nepomucene was drowned in the Moldau by order of the impious Emperor Wenceslaus in 1393. Blessed John Sarkander, born in 1576, became parish-

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priest of Boskowitz in 1613 and of Holleschau in Moravia in 1616. Because he refused to divulge a confession made to him by an enemy of the Hussites, he was falsely accused of having incited the Poles to invade the country. Though thrice racked with frightful ferocity, and his sides burnt with pitch and sulphur, he survived this treatment a month and died of his wounds in prison on March 17th, 1620. Pope Pius IX beatified him in 1859.

St. Walhere, whose feast is kept throughout the diocese of Namur on June 27th, was parish-priest of Onhaye in Belgium, and rural dean. In this later capacity he had to correct his own nephew, the parish-priest of Hastière, for his dissolute life. This monster—he was nothing less—waylaid his uncle by night, slew him, and threw his body into the Meuse whence it was recovered and honourably interred in his own church, where it is still visited by pilgrimages. We are left in the dark as to the nephew's fate. St. Walhere's death took place at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

If it is still further objected that none of these were canonized as parish-priests but as martyrs, then there remains this final question: are there any members of the secular clergy whose veneration is allowed by the Holy See by one of the three modes, canonization, beatification, or approval of cult? The following short notices will, we feel confident, put the matter beyond all doubt.

In the Roman Martyrology, under the date June 1st, we read: "In Umbria, the feast of Saint Fortunatus the priest, glorious for his virtues and miracles." This saint of the fifth century attended to the spiritual needs of the people of Torrita in Umbria and lived by manual labour, greatly assisting the poor from his earnings. He is the principal patron of the city of Montefalco. Under the 13th of June we find in the Martyrology, "In the territory of Viviers the feast of Saint Ostian, priest and confessor." Ostian was pastor of Viviers at some period in the sixth century. The Bollandists quote Ghinus as playing upon the saint's name in his eulogium "devote offerens Deo, coeli ostium invenit opertum." An early French parish-priest was St. Amabilis of Riom in the Auvergne, who died on November 1st about the year

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475. Although his fame was widespread we know no other facts of his life, but his relics were said to heal snake-bite. His feast is kept at the Cathedral of Clermont on October 18th.

St. Severus, whose feast is commemorated in the Roman Martyrology on February 15th, was parish-priest of Intero-crea in the Abruzzi, and lived in the first half of the sixth century. St. Gregory the Great relates the following story concerning his pastoral work. One day when occupied in attending his vineyard he was called to a sick parishioner, but delayed for some time to finish some small task. At length he set out for the man's house but was met by a crowd of people lamenting his delay and crying out that there was no further use in his coming as the sick man was already dead. Overcome with horror at his fault and crying out that he was a murderer, he hastened to the dwelling and there prostrated himself by the side of the dead man, loudly lamenting his negligence and shedding tears of such heart-felt contrition that God raised the dead man to life again.

Another St. Severus has his feast observed in the cathedral of Tarbes and Lourdes, on September 5th. He lived in the sixth century and was parish-priest of Bigorre in France. St. Gregory of Tours, quoted by the Bollandists, relates that he served two churches that lay about twenty miles apart, and on Sundays he celebrated Mass in each of them. Once, being late, he vigorously spurred his horse and severely dashed his head against an overhanging bough. In a moment of impatience he cursed the tree root and branch. He had occasion to remain a few days at the second church and on his return found the tree completely withered. Struck with remorse for his want of patience, he prayed to God to restore it to life, whereupon it again burst into leaf.

St. Gamelbert, parish-priest of Michaelsbuch in Lower Bavaria, was declared Blessed by Pope Pius X in 1909. Born at the same place early in the eighth century he became a soldier, but gave up this career for the priesthood and was appointed to the parish of his native town, where he worked for fifty years teaching and ministering to his people and rooting out paganism. He died on January 17th,

about 790. His body lies under the high altar of the parish church.

England at this same period is credited with a saint who worked as a pastor of souls at Elst in Holland, St. Werenfrid, the companion of that great English apostle St. Willibrord, first bishop of Utrecht. Though Werenfrid himself principally did apostolic work as a missionary, he certainly had a particular charge of souls at Elst. His death took place in 760, and his feast on August 14th is celebrated in the metropolitan cathedral of Utrecht. The Bollandists resist the claim that he was a Benedictine, maintaining that he was a secular priest. St. Florinus, parish-priest of Remüs in Switzerland, has also claims on this country, his father being a Briton who married a converted Jewess. It is related in his life that his parents went on pilgrimage to Rome and then settled in Switzerland, where their son was born. The parish-priest of Remüs, Alexander, educated him for the priesthood, and on his death Florinus took over his charge. He died on November 17th, 856; his tomb is still a place of pilgrimage. His feast is kept as a double of the first class in the cathedrals of Chur, Brixen, and St. Gall. Of alleged English birth is St. Grimoald, parish-priest in the twelfth century of Pontecorvo, now a cathedral city, where his feast is kept on September 30th, but he is commemorated in the Roman Martyrology on the previous day. He died in 1137. The Bollandists deny his English birth. Another English parish-priest abroad was St. William of Pontoise, so called after his parish which he served until his death in 1193. He was held in high esteem by the great king, Philip Augustus, in whose palace at Pontoise he died. His feast is celebrated at Pontoise on May 1st, but at Versailles on the following day.

Blessed Thomas Helye deserves inclusion here as having worked as a parish-priest at Saint-Maurice in the diocese of Coutances. He remained a secular priest but spent the last years of his life giving missions in parts of Normandy. He died on October 10th, 1257, and was beatified in 1857. Davanazato, parish-priest of S. Lucia in Cassiano in Tuscany, who died in 1295, is included in some lists of Franciscan saints, but does not seem to have had his cult approved,

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although the Bollandists and Holweck place his feast on July 7th. Like the Curé d'Ars he was a Franciscan tertiary. Blessed Bartolo Buonpedoni became parish-priest of Pecchioli in Italy in 1250 and led a most saintly life there for thirty years. In 1280 he became a leper and died in a leper hospital after twenty years of suffering in 1300. His feast, first instituted in 1499, was approved and his cult confirmed by Pope Pius X in 1910. Less well known is Blessed John, parish-priest (plebanus) of the church of San Giovanni in Venice, who died in 1348 and was beatified by Pope Boniface IX in 1400.

But after St. John Vianney the most glorious example of the parochial priesthood was St. Ivo H elory, canonized by Pope Clement VI in 1347. This great man, patron of lawyers, was born at Kermartin near Tr eguier in Brittany on October 17th, 1253. He studied theology and canon law at Paris, and the civil law at Orleans. Called to Rennes he was appointed diocesan judge, but at the request of his own bishop took up the same post at Tr eguier. In 1284 he was ordained priest, and three years later gave up all his offices with their emoluments to become parish-priest, first of Tedrez and then of Lovannec where he remained until his death in 1303. As a parish-priest he was in every way a model, zealous in administering the sacraments, in preaching and instructing his people: and he was ever at the command of his neighbouring clergy for special sermons, for which his knowledge of Latin, French, and Breton well fitted him. His charity passed all known bounds. He stripped himself of all his money, and not infrequently gave in alms the very clothes off his back. One morning he found a tramp asleep on his doorstep, and for the unconscious breach of hospitality due to a locked door, punished himself the following night by sleeping in his turn on the doorstep, insisting moreover that the tramp should occupy his bed. We hope for the beggar's sake that it was a different bed from the one the saint was accustomed to use, otherwise it is doubtful which was the more comfortable, or, rather, less comfortable, for when he was a young priest St. Ivo's couch consisted of a straw mat with a book or stone for a pillow, and towards the



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end of his life became still more comfortless, for a hurdle of twigs had replaced the straw. He further exercised his spirit of charity by selling all his corn and distributing the value of it to the poor. When urged to wait and watch the market before selling, he replied that he might die before he could dispose of it. In addition he built a hospital for the sick in which he often served the sick with his own hands. His death took place on May 19th, 1303, and his feast is kept on that day. He is incorrectly stated to have been a Franciscan tertiary. St. Ivo's case alone is sufficient to refute the statement which we have considered at such length, for although he lived a most saintly life as a student and as a diocesan official, his full sanctity was acquired in that quiet and continuous work for souls which is the glory of a parish-priest's life.

Our apology, if we have wearied the reader with an untoward burden of facts and dates, is that the Curé was not the last priest to be worried by the statement we set out to refute. More than once we have been asked if it were true that no parish-priest has been declared a saint, and when we answered in the negative the famous statement has at once been put forward as an objection. God alone knows the number of his saints, but how many of us remember and revere the memory of holy priests we have known, or under whose charge we may have lived.

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