

## SAINTS, SINNERS AND HOSPITALS

IN *Monsieur Vincent*, a book which has been much read of late in France, the author, Henri Lavedan, describing the horrors of the Hotel Dieu or chief hospital of Paris from an eighteenth century document, remarks that conditions were doubtless worse still in the seventeenth century. Why 'doubtless'? Does he believe, one wonders, in the nineteenth century theory of inevitable progress; is each century really better in every way than the one which preceded it?

Many years ago Lecoy de la Marche, in his *Guerre aux Erreurs, Historiques*, had shown the weakness of this theory when dealing with the very theme of the help given to the poor in the Middle Ages. Both seventeenth and eighteenth centuries far from marking any sort of advance showed a terrible falling off from the standards and the practice of the past.

Although the Hotel Dieu went back traditionally to St. Landry Archbishop of Paris in the seventh century, the building still standing at St. Vincent's time was that built by St. Louis, who himself served the sick within its walls.

At the time of St. Louis the hospitals, says M. Enlart in his *Manuel d'Archeologie*, 'were conducted with such a perfect understanding of the laws of hygiene that the most recent progress in this matter consists in restoring the arrangements universally adopted in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.'

There were wide windows above the beds, the architecture, in addition to its beauty, was excellently adapted to lighting and airing the wards. The patients' privacy was respected by an arrangement of partitions between the beds, while raised galleries enabled the nurses to oversee the whole ward. The walls were

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whitewashed, and those of the Hotel Dieu of Paris were every year cleaned and redone. Thirteen hundred brooms were bought every year to clean the building, and, in the fourteenth century, an ingenious system was found of carrying the water supply through all the wards. There were large fireplaces and iron trollies carrying brasiers were wheeled through the rooms.

Small hospitals were in the Middle Ages much preferred to large as keeping more of the feeling of family life, and special donations were given for the patients to have the food that pleased them best.

By the seventeenth century there had been much 'progress' away from the days of St. Louis. Far from the patients having separate rooms or cubicles, they were sleeping three, six, or even twelve in one bed. Many of the great lords of France had bequeathed their beds to the hospital, and in these enormous receptacles patients at times of heavy illness were placed six one way and six the other. During times of plague the clothes of those who died were sold at the door. Only two meals a day were supplied to the patients, whatever their disease.

Worse still was the state of things spiritually. Every patient was obliged on admission to go to Confession, and the number of sacrilegious confessions may be imagined.

Small wonder that some of the zealous ladies grouped by St. Vincent into one of his earliest confraternities should have besought him to intervene. But the hospital was under the care of the Chanoines de Notre Dame and some Augustinian Nuns, and St. Vincent hesitated to 'thrust his sickle into another man's harvest.' Nothing daunted, the President of the little band of ladies sought the Archbishop of Paris, who requested of St. Vincent to choose a body of workers to help in the hospital.

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How this great reforming Saint received such an order to remedy matters crying out for reform may best be seen by his directions to the first workers chosen by him for this delicate task. They were not to supersede the nuns already in the hospital, but to work with them, and he foresaw all the difficulties and met them after the fashion of the saints.

He directed his workers :

(1) To invoke daily on entering the Hotel Dieu the help of Our Lord, the true Father of the poor, by the intercession of Our Lady and St. Louis, the founder of the hospital.

(2) To go to the nuns who have the care of the sick and to offer to serve them together with these in order to share in the merits of their good works.

(3) To esteem and respect these religious as visible angels, speaking to them with sweetness and humility, and showing complete deference towards them.

(4) If it happened that these good women did not always take their kind intentions in good part, to make excuses for them, and strive to enter into their feelings, never contradicting or grieving them, or trying to get the better of them.

‘ We aim,’ said he, ‘ at taking a share in the salvation and solace of the poor, and this is a thing that cannot be done without the help and goodwill of these good nuns who rule them. It is then just to show them honour as to mothers and to treat them as the spouses of Our Lord and the Ladies of the House. It is the mark of the spirit of God to act sweetly, and it is the surest means of success to imitate this way of acting.’

What did he achieve? A great temporary success. Special delicacies were provided to supplement the rough and inadequate fare ; better nursing, clean linen,

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best of all the substitution of many genuine confessions for the obligatory external act, and therefore many happy deathbeds.

But we learn from M. Lavedan's documents of a century later that the success was in fact only temporary: indeed, contrary to the conclusion drawn by him, one is inclined to think that the eighteenth century conditions were a few degrees worse than those of its predecessor.

But if we may not draw the conclusion of either a steady progress or a steady retrogression, surely there is one conclusion that may be drawn: as Mr. Chesterton has told us, if you want to keep a white post white you must keep on re-painting it. And, again, if you want to carry on aright the work of a saint, another saint must be found to do it. St. Louis served the sick in the Hotel Dieu, and built hospitals up and down his country. St. Vincent invoked St. Louis, and did the work of St. Louis under the altered conditions of a later century. In every century the saints are needed if humanity is to be kept at a supernatural level. And then there will be progress.

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