

## Comment: *Making Saints*

*'These English amongst whom we live have set up certain persons whom they revere as saints. At times, when I reflect upon the lives of these persons, ... I entertain serious doubts as to their sanctity.'*

(Archbishop Lanfranc of Canterbury)

Lanfranc, an Italian who had lived in Normandy, distrusted the English for canonising improbable and unsuitable characters. He took particular exception to the veneration of Elphege, one of his Anglo-Saxon predecessors as Archbishop of Canterbury, who was beaten to death with meat bones by drunken Danes for opposing a poll tax. Not surprisingly, he was venerated as a martyr, and his relics were solemnly installed in the cathedral at Canterbury. Before the establishment of an official canonisation procedure saints were made by popular opinion. Inevitably, such homage was often infused with a strong sense of the local and the partisan. Saints and their relics not only focused the religious devotion of a particular community, but intensified its sense of identity, guaranteed its protection and secured for it the blessing of divine favour. It was the danger of the exaltation of the particular at the expense of the universal, a danger which could lead to idolatry and sectarianism, which prompted the establishment of a more rigorous process of canonization by the popes.

The systematisation of the form of canonisation was intended to allow space for due deliberation and investigation of the lives and miracles of the proposed saints. Instant canonisations were to be avoided. However, such was the popular demand for the recognition of certain holy individuals that some, like Thomas Becket, Francis of Assisi and Anthony of Padua, were proclaimed saints in an exceedingly short time. Thérèse of Lisieux, canonised twenty eight years after her death, holds the modern record for rapid promotion. In all of these cases the power of popular piety was evident. The papacy, after the year 1300, far from encouraging such outbreaks of religious fervour, sought to discipline them and order them towards the good of the Church; the number of canonisations sharply decreased. Against this background the recent proliferation of canonisations has particular significance, a significance which is sharply expressed by the rumoured imminence of the beatification of Monsignor Escrivà de Balaguer, Marques de Peralta, founder of *Opus Dei*, who died in 1975.

The present pope has proclaimed more saints than all of his twentieth century predecessors put together. Admittedly many of these have been martyrs, a fitting tribute to the extraordinary surge of missionary activity in the past three hundred years of the Church's history, and a sombre reminder

that more Christians have died for the faith in this century than in any of the great persecutions of the early Church. This explosion of beatitude does not necessarily disclose a greater profusion of sanctity in the world of today so much as an anxiety that the universal call to holiness is less audible these days than in the past. Escrivà's cause was supported by 69 cardinals, 241 archbishops, 987 bishops and 41 superiors of religious orders. The demand of the faithful for Escrivà's canonisation does not feature; unless it is provided by the 76,000 lay members of *Opus Dei* around the world. It is easy, and unworthy, to imply that the movement for Escrivà's canonisation is as political and ideological in its motivation as it is religious; the same charge has been laid against those who are pressing for the canonisation of John Henry Newman or Franz Jagerstatter. Nevertheless, Escrivà's progress towards canonisation shows that the present procedures, rather than containing the particular in order to serve the universal, as the thirteenth century popes intended, are in fact susceptible to manipulation by powerful pressure groups within the Church. Modern canonisations seek to present particular role models to beleaguered Christians living in a secularised world. It could be argued that the faithful no longer 'make' saints, they accept those chosen for them by their pastors. Sanctity now challenges at a personal rather than at an ecclesial level.

In the sophisticated world of bourgeois Europe, canonisation is seen less as the recognition of a living reality and more as the awarding of a posthumous honour to a worthy Christian. It is the equivalent of a religious 'honours system', something which is granted by the Church to a dead individual rather than the reception by the Church of the unique witness of a graced person. Clearly no religious congregation feels that it has 'made it' unless its founder is canonised. As a result large sums of money are expended on the industry of sanctity; sometimes, instead of promoting the institute, the canonisation of its founder can lead to the canonisation of a particular charism and to the fossilisation of the community. Many shrinking religious congregations have devoted disproportionate human and financial resources to the canonisation of their founders in the hope that the vocational appeal of the founding hero will inspire a flood of recruits. Again the universal has been sacrificed to the particular; evangelisation to the mirage of survival.

Many anxieties have been expressed about the validity the canonisation of Monsignor Escrivà would give to *Opus Dei*. Some of the arguments levelled against *Opus Dei* by its opponents are similar to those used against the mendicants in the thirteenth century and the Jesuits in the sixteenth and later. Placed against the background of the profusion of new movements in the Church, most of which have found favour from the Holy See, *Opus Dei* appears less threatening as an institution. Certainly, the writings of its founder owe more to the spirituality of a minor seminary than to any more sinister school of theology. However, the apparent appeal of *Opus Dei*, together with the remarkable expansion of charismatic, mixed communities of lay and religious in France and elsewhere, should give rise to some

concern on the part of their critics. Many of these new movements have some elements in common: a stress on prayer and the contemplative dimension of Christian experience; a devotion to the proper celebration of the liturgy; a simplicity of life-style; an inclination to study; a drive towards evangelisation; a desire for community. The joylessness and liturgical impoverishment of many religious communities often appear to offer feeble witness to hope in comparison. If Monsignor Escrivà is canonised some will have difficulty with it, as Lanfranc found Elphege hard to admire and Newman had doubts about Jerome. The event, if it happens, should lead us not to question the need for saints, but to think carefully about what we are saying when we 'make' them.

AJW

## Faith, Like Henry Suso's Knife

James McGonigal

Tired at last, he listened to what trees  
and the orange sky were saying  
(the park like a huge ear was straining  
to catch new words for grass and clay):

These are tears not for the end  
but for the start of love;  
they drop like souls from knife-edge holds  
on purgatorial cliffs — above

in mild midwinter gloom birds shout  
like angels to the empty air,  
trees flex their muscles and blood drips: see  
Christ's name cut about the heart with care.