

The Saint In Catholic Tradition

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I find myself always very profoundly moved by accounts of Chinese wisdom and Chinese life, partly because there is an extraordinary courage and simplicity in not presenting the Ultimate in personal terms. You are left with a far more radical challenge, very different from the Biblical way or the way of Biblical traditions.

I suppose that the simplest way of explaining what a saint is the Catholic tradition in to begin with Jesus. For us, Jesus is the Wisdom of God personified, but that has to be read in an inclusive and not an exclusive sense; that is to say, every creature, and particularly, every person is a Word of God, and that in every creature and every person God is to be met, apprehended, appreciated, and thanked. I think that when we look at the Gospel accounts of the things that Jesus himself said and did, the implication is not that people should focus so sharply on his person, but rather that people should be turned to the source of all being that Jesus calls Father, and that they should take their own experience seriously.

In the sayings of Jesus there is so much that directs people back to their experience of nature, their experience of family relationships, their experience of their own conscience and development and so on, and this is possibly an aspect that our more formal handing on of the tradition has neglected — that it has tended to focus on the person of Jesus in an exclusive, not an inclusive sense. I believe that one of the correctives of that is precisely the veneration of saints; that is, looking at people of different cultures and different periods in history and stations in life and seeing the Word of God in them.

There are three saying of Jesus of Nazareth that I think tend to define why we canonize certain people. When I say canonize, we have had,

particularly in the Catholic tradition, the habit of recognizing certain exemplary manifestations of wisdom and naming them as saints. In the early centuries this was spontaneous. In later centuries it became a very official institutional process which means that the later saints don't seem to have the same appeal or the same heart. The ones that have most appeal are the ones that are a response to popular recognition.

The first of the sayings of Jesus of Nazareth that I think are helpful is the story of the merchant who was selling pearls. He found one pearl of such great price that he went away and sold absolutely everything he owned to get that one pearl. I think we see the saint as somebody who will sacrifice everything for the truth...but what kind of truth; not speculative or abstract truth, not empirical truth or the logically inevitable; but the kind of truth the Bible speaks of; that has more to do with what can be relied upon — that which is faithful and trustworthy.

The truth that people we recognize as saints have sacrificed everything for is, in the first place, the truth of a relationship with God as source of being; and in the second place, the truth of solidarity of all human creatures, and indeed of all creation, of community and communion.

A second saying of Jesus of Nazareth is that if you have a lamp, it would be foolish to put it under a basket. You put it in the house where it can give light and I think that people that we have singled out as saints, as exemplary, as telling us something about our own possibilities, are people who share the truth of what they have experienced. They may share it very concretely in charitable and compassionate kinds of activities; or they may share it in a reflective way, teaching about it.

A third saying of Jesus — and I thought here of the extraordinary parallel with the Taoist sage that Sr. Kim mentioned — was that you can't really get into the Reign of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, unless you are like a child, unless there is a certain simplicity. What kind of simplicity? Well I think a kind of simplicity — and here's where the parallel comes in — that isn't impressed with status, or power, or wealth, or book-learning. The kind of simplicity that comes to the heart of the thing directly out of experience. There is something very odd about our traditional way of dealing with the things; As I look at specific examples of saints in the light of the critical historical information that we have about them, they tend in their own time to appear distinctly as disruptive, but in retrospect, we make them very contemplative and sanctioning of the status quo and unquestioning. It is an extraordinary dialectic that is going on there, that we

have again and again a kind of explosion of illumination and then we try to domesticate it and make it seem part of the same picture that we accepted before.

When Dr. Peter Lee asked me to talk about the Catholic saint, he had suggested taking a woman saint as an example. The fact of the matter is that we have actually canonized many more men than women, not because the men were more illuminated than women, but because they tended to be in positions where they attracted attention and the women were not. I have chosen six saints by way of example, three men and three women.

From the second century we have, in Justin the Martyr, a rather interesting example of someone who really does appear as a manifestation or personification of wisdom. This was somebody who traveled around in search of wisdom, exploring different philosophies and finally came upon Christianity as a philosophy - that's what he thought he was meeting. One of his contemporaries made the comment that for someone familiar with the pagan philosophies, it really was an extraordinary wrench to take Christianity seriously because it doesn't come from the cultured Greeks, it comes from the Barbarian Hebrews.

Having taken it seriously, Justin the Martyr hangs out his shingle, which of course in time of persecution, as it then was, was a very dangerous thing to do. He gives up everything for the one pearl. He wouldn't put the light under a bushel. He said: "No! I will tell anybody who comes all about this wonderful thing that I have discovered". You might say ultimately that he exemplifies the simplicity of the child, because having been convinced of the truth of his discovery he simply lives his life until he is arrested. He shares what he has to share with anybody who comes. He doesn't claim any particular status. Finally, he is arrested and executed.

A second example is that of a young woman named Perpetua of North Africa, a little later than Justin. She lived during one of the last persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire; a person of exceptional education and culture, she also discovers Christianity and enrolls as a catechumen knowing that this is a very dangerous thing to do, but simply choosing the one pearl, saying "I've discovered wisdom, I'm going to pursue it". She did this at the time she got married and then, just after she had her first child, she was arrested. The story tells of two tremendous struggles that she went through. One was that she was terrified that the baby would die since she could not breast feed it; and the other was that her father kept pleading with her not to do this to him in his old age. It is told among the legends

about her that she went through a very difficult discernment process and decided to hold firm, no matter what arguments anybody would present to her.

The next two examples are of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century and Catherine of Sienna a little later. Aquinas, probably much better known than most Catholic saints, was an Italian of noble birth, an infant prodigy of sorts, passionately interested in philosophy, fascinated by Aristotle when he manages to get to university in Milan, and under great pressure from his family who wanted him to be a Benedictine at a certain monastery because there he would become the Abbott, in that way he could have status, worldly power and a religious life. He refused and became a begging friar — an interesting, radical kind of choice, an oppositional stance in relation to the society of the time. Aquinas's work is well known and he has become a figure symbolizing establishment, but what is not so well known is that everything that he did was bought at the price of very radical choices. Even his acceptance of Aristotelian Philosophy into the presentation of the Christian faith was a very radical choice at the time, and was an oppositional one.

A little later came Catherine of Sienna, who died very young. She was an Italian girl of a merchant family in the very early stages of capitalism. She was expected to accept all the conventional piety and then do one of two things; make the marriage which her family arranged for her, which would be a bond between the mercantile houses; or she should go into a convent, also appropriate to the time.

The story of Catherine is that as a child she went into hiding in solitude for years in her own house, refusing to speak or mix with people in an ordinary relationship. She spent her time thinking, meditating, praying, getting a perspective on things, and then very suddenly, burst into public life and did all kinds of things utterly unsuitable for a young woman of a merchant family to do.

She began to consort with prisoners due for execution; she leapt into all kinds of tasks of reconciliation with warring cities and feuding families; she stepped out of line and travelled with a following of young people in quest of her wisdom (nicknamed the Catherini) and finally she travelled to Avignon to tell the Pope that "You as head of the Churches of the West are not doing your job. You are in Avignon where you don't belong. You are living the life of the leisured classes which is not what you are there for as Pope. Get back to Rome and start doing your job." In retrospect we

canonized her but certainly her actions were seen as horrendously inappropriate in her own time.

The next example is Ignatius of Loyola, a Basque courtier and soldier, injured in a battle. Lying in bed recovering, he read two sets of stories to take his mind off the pain and the boredom; One set of stories about chivalry and adventure, and another set of stories about Jesus and saints. He said that when he reflected back on the effect that the reading had on him, he had to acknowledge that he could get terribly excited about the stories of love and adventure, but that afterwards, he felt empty. When he picked up the other stories, it was a considerable effort and he read them only because there was nothing else to read.

In retrospect, he found he was getting to real wisdom, to what life was really about and to what puts it in perspective. Out of that, Ignatius of Loyola devised a kind of schooling of the mind and the heart to see things in perspective. He proposed that Christians go over their basic beliefs of where they stood in relation to God, history, other people, and the possibilities of their own lives; and having reflected on these in depth, to trust their own judgment. This was in Reformation times and from a Catholic perspective, it was a very radical and oppositional thing to propose. He called it 'Discernment of Spirits'. You look into your own experience. Don't expect the answers to be written up for you in history or in books. You really wrestle with the reality, coming back to the idea suggested in the beginning; that every person is a Word of God, every creature is a Word of God, and there is something very positive to be read in our experience.

The final example is a young French peasant girl who was a visionary in quite modern times, Bernadette Soubirous. She had a vision of Mary the Mother of Jesus coming and explaining things to her. What is explained is extremely simple: that you should turn back to God; remember that most basic reality is your relationship to God. The particular form of the image which she saw was Mary the Mother of Jesus going through an exercise that Catholics call the Rosary, a rhythmic pattern of meditating on the story of the life of Jesus. In utterly simple terms and very concrete representations she was saying that what you have to do is take Jesus as a basic model and look at it in your own life.

In conclusion, these examples of exemplary manifestation of wisdom tell us that Jesus of Nazareth isn't supposed to be somehow an exclusive manifestation of the Divine, an exclusive personification or incarnation of the Divine Word, but an inclusive, prototypical one.