

INTRODUCTION

The subject of 'Saints and Sanctity' might seem a natural one for the Ecclesiastical History Society's meetings, given that the history of the Church is often popularly conceived of as a sequence of saints – and heretics – and the idea of the saint very easily captures the popular imagination: witness the, to some, surprising interest aroused by the recent (September 2010) beatification of John Henry Cardinal Newman, which advanced him a stage further towards formal canonization. Yet, although earlier meetings of the society have touched on aspects of sanctity – 'Martyrs and Martyrologies' (1992–3), 'The Holy Land, Holy Lands, and Christian History' (1998–9), and 'The Church and Mary' (2001–2) – the broad topic of 'Saints and Sanctity' has never been addressed before.

Anyone reading through the papers presented here will discover that it is a subject of very great diversity; no general message emerges from these pages. In one of the areas of my research – Late Antiquity and Byzantium – the topic has, over the last quarter of a century, been very much at the forefront of research (probably the reason for my lighting on the topic for the conferences during my period as president). Much of this interest was sparked off by Peter Brown's remarkable article, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity' (1971), which has spawned a shoal of articles and books which have pushed elements of Brown's approach beyond the boundaries of Late Antiquity at least as far as early medieval Europe and the world of Byzantium. The quarter-century of the publication of that article has been marked by several symposia devoted to its influence. Nevertheless, even though Brown's approach, drawing on sociological and social anthropological models, led to the phenomenon of the saint or holy man being understood in a particular way, later research (even that of Brown himself) has questioned or qualified such an approach as often as it has advanced it.

The aim of the Summer and Winter Meetings in 2009–10 was to take this interest further and to explore the whole notion of sanctity in Christian history. The response exceeded my expecta-

tions, and has resulted in the volume before you. Some feared it would be an excessively medieval topic, and while the chronological sequence takes longer to reach the early modern period than in the proceedings of some earlier conferences, there is no lack of exploration of the role of sanctity from the close of the Middle Ages to the present day.

The title of the conferences points to two questions – what is a saint? and what is sanctity? – that are naturally raised many times and in different ways. Is a saint a role model? someone with special powers? a patron and intercessor? Is sanctity something that is perceived in contemporary human beings? or are saints the noble dead? Who decides? Throughout Christian history we can detect an ambiguity between sanctity as the goal, perhaps rarely achieved, of the Christian life, that is, something to do with the inner life of the Christian, something hardly claimed by anyone for themselves (though there are exceptions to this), and sanctity as an aura of power, claimed for individuals by their friends, or more often by those who want to make use of the power thus acknowledged. Historians have perhaps been more attracted to the relationships of power in which claims to sanctity play a role, but several contributions to this volume try to look at sanctity as an inward quality. And there are Christian traditions, notably many forms of Protestantism, that call in question the very notion of attaining sanctity, in the name of a notion of justification by faith that marginalizes works.

One feature of the saint that seems to have been there from the beginning is the way in which the saint, though now a denizen of the heavenly courts, is still thought of as belonging to a particular locality. The cult of the saints is largely a cult of local saints. There is often a mismatch between the claims of a local see or particular monastery, and the local boys (rarely girls) on offer, which opens the door to the imagination of those seeking, by means of the saint, to promote local claims to power. A number of papers explore another element of this sense of the locality of the saint: what to do with the renown of saints that continued after the Reformation in a world of thought that had little place for the notion of sanctity? It is not surprising for a conference held in Durham that the question of the legacy of St Cuthbert is discussed in these pages.

The cult of the saints became a prominent feature of early

and medieval Christianity, and has continued to be important in those Christian traditions that repudiated or were unaffected by the Reformation. Within such cults, the saints had to be promoted. The *life* of the saint is the primary form of this, and this is explored in a variety of ways in this volume, including some examples of figures from the Protestant tradition in which the story of the life held up individuals for emulation and admiration, if not veneration. Saints' *vitae* need authors, and the intentions of such authors can be various and not always conscious. An author who knew the saint may be promoting himself as much as the saint by his association with him or her. More often the author of such lives is reduced to *topoi*, as he develops a story from very scanty material. One might argue that the very common case of an author of a saint's life – some humble monk, himself unknown, scribbling away in his monastery – is more interesting than the better informed author, as the lack of material about the saint brings to the fore the devotion to the saint that was expressed in the cult. Particularly interesting, too, though only glanced at in this volume, is the way in which female saints were generally promoted by male authors who promoted them by writing their lives, and often developing their cult, thereby making issues of gender doubly reflexive. Gender issues emerge in other ways: in some periods women saints seem very rare, in other periods they are much more prominent. How is one to account for this?

As well as the *vita*, the cult was supported by other ways of presenting or honouring the saint. The focus of the cult was generally the relics of the saint. Shrines and reliquaries could become ways of promoting the saint, as could visual depictions in statues and icons: there is rich material for exploration of the understanding of the role of the saint, and the nature of sanctity, to be found here. Again, we find that it is devotion to the saint that is prominent, how he or she is venerated, rather than traditions about his or her life. Gifts to a shrine – vestments (discussed in this volume in the case of St Cuthbert), statues, icons and adornments to these objects of devotion, often thank-offerings – are important indications of the extent and nature of his or her veneration. In modern times, photography, and the retouching of photographs, gives an interesting insight into the visual model it was thought important to project in the case of a saint, something particularly documented in the case of St Thérèse of Lisieux.

INTRODUCTION

Local cults and traditions about saints are important in the genesis of the saint, but as time passed, and particularly in the second Christian millennium, some formal process of canonization was required for the recognition of a saint. These are mostly alluded to, rather than discussed, in these pages, but it is clear that such procedures were human, however much it was thought they were discerning something beyond the human. Politics often muscled in on claims to sanctity, hardly surprising as sanctity entailed a claim to power. The role of the Russian tsar in the canonization of the great Russian saint, Serafim of Sarov, is discussed, as is the record of the greatest maker (or acknowledger) ever of saints, the late Pope John Paul II. It becomes difficult to avoid the impression that the criteria that came into play involved considerations which were often very arbitrary.

All these and many other issues are raised and engaged with, though hardly finally answered, in the essays contained in this collection. However, to look for some overall conclusion is probably not appropriate. Variety seems to be of the essence in the matter of saints and sanctity – variety and locality. Perhaps the lesson which is most obvious from reading the contributions to this volume is the extent to which investigation of the phenomenon of sanctity invites a variety of approaches. Many of the papers here suggest that we look at something that has been missing in recent or traditional scholarship. As the phenomenon of saints and sanctity is multivalent, so too are appropriate ways of approaching the subject.

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