

MARRIED SANCTITY

THE question is sometimes asked: Are there any married saints? Of course we all know there have been many married saints who died as martyrs; many who lived virginal lives in holy wedlock after the example of our Lady and St. Joseph; many who attained to heroic sanctity in widowhood; many who made a compact of continence after some years of marriage; and lastly there have been many married saints who mutually agreed to separate and serve God for the rest of their days in sanctuary or cloister. But all these categories are here excluded, and an attempt is made to show from hagiography that quite a numerous body of saints can be found who served God in the married state until their death, and lived lives of heroic sanctity, without surrendering the rights and responsibilities of parenthood.

Practically all the Old Testament saints fulfilled these conditions, and amongst those married to one wife we may instance Isaac, Joseph the Chaste and Moses, whilst of holy wives we cannot find a better example than the chaste Susanna. Verging on the New Law we have our Lady's holy parents Joachim and Anna, and Zachary and Elizabeth, parents of the Baptist.

Of the many married Christians who became disciples of the Apostles, St. Paul singles out St. Aquila and his wife, St. Priscilla, for special mention three times in his Epistles, whilst St. Luke speaks of them three times in the Acts of the Apostles.¹ They were not martyrs, although they suffered much for the faith, having been exiled from Rome on that account. They died according to the Roman Martyrology in Asia Minor and their combined feast falls on July 8th.

In the early part of the fourth century when the Diocletian persecution was still raging throughout the Empire, there lived a very holy couple at Caesarea in Cappadocia, St. Basil the Elder and St. Emily (Emelia). The latter, a Christian girl of great wealth and beauty, was left an orphan at the age of fifteen, and although she had a desire to serve God in the state of perpetual virginity, she, with rare prudence in one so young, decided that in those turbulent days such a course might expose her to grave risk, and therefore gave her hand in marriage to a man of mature age, Basil, an eminent lawyer and a firm Christian. Surely never was there a union

¹ Rom. xvi. 3; I. Cor. xvi. 19; II. Tim. 19; Acts xviii, 2, 18, 26.

more blessed, for of the ten children born to them, four were saints—Basil, bishop and doctor of the Church; Gregory of Nyssa, bishop and father of the Church; Peter of Sebaste, bishop; and Macrina the Younger, virgin. St. Basil the Elder died some time previous to the year 350, but although his wife survived him many years they have a common commemoration in the Roman Martyrology on May 30th.²

A contemporary family of equal sanctity, and apparently well acquainted with Basil and his wife, consisted of St. Gregory of Nazianzen the Elder and St. Nonna, and their three children—St. Gregory of Nazianzen, perhaps the greatest Doctor of the Eastern Church; St. Gorgonia and St. Caesarius, the last being born in 330, when his father had already been bishop of Nazianzen two years. Celibacy, however, was not binding on the clergy in the fourth century. The husband died in 374 almost a centenarian, and his wife died a few months later. Their son St. Gregory wrote much about his holy parents and his sister St. Gorgonia, who after a married life of great holiness died before her parents and her husband in 372. St. Gregory the Elder's feast is not generally commemorated in the Latin Church, but only in Jerusalem, where his feast is kept on January 1st. St. Nonna's commemoration in the Roman Martyrology falls on August 6th, that of her daughter Gorgonia on December 9th.³

On September 4th is commemorated St. Candida the Younger, one of the patron saints of the city and diocese of Naples. Beyond the fact that she was a Neapolitan woman who lived a life of great sanctity, and hidden charity, and died in 586 leaving her husband with one young child, a son, we know nothing of her life.⁴

In the next two centuries we find a considerable group of married saints, all remarkable for the singular holiness of their children. Blessed Pepin of Landen, ancestor of the Carolingian kings, was, in pre-revolutionary France, venerated on February 21st, and his wife St. Ida, who survived him some years, on May 5th. Pepin died in 640. Two of their children are saints—Gertrude of Nivelles and Begga. Both were nuns, but Begga was a widow.⁵ The former has always ranked as one of Europe's greatest saints, and was as famous in the Middle Ages as St. Gertrude the Great.

² Holweck, *Biographical Dictionary of the Saints*, Herder, 1924, s.v.; Acta SS. (Bollandists) May. t. vii. 238.

³ See their several biographical notices in Holweck and in Smith and Wace's *Dictionary of Christian Biography*; also Acta SS. Jan. t. i. 20, Aug. ii. 67.

⁴ Holweck; Smith and Wace; Acta SS. Sept. t. ii. 229.

⁵ Holweck; Smith and Wace; Acta SS. Feb. t. iii. 253; Butler, ed. Thurston, ii. 293.

At Ostrevant in Flanders there was living at the same period St. Adalbald and his wife St. Rictrude, with their children, St. Maront, abböt, and SS. Eusebia, Clotsendis and Adalsindis, all nuns. Adalbald was killed by an assassin in 652, whereupon his wife retired with her three daughters to the monastery she had built at Marchiennes. The husband's feast is kept at St. Amand in Flanders, the place of his burial, on February 2nd, his wife's at Cambrai on May 12th.⁶

A saint whose cult seems to have lapsed is Blessed Hildegarde, wife of the Emperor Charlemagne, whom she married when she was only fifteen, and by whom she became the mother of eight children. She died in her twenty-sixth year in 783, and her body was enshrined in Kempten Abbey, which she had splendidly restored, and where her feast was celebrated on April 30th until the opening of the nineteenth century.⁷ She is but one of the many examples of royal married saints whose holy lives did much to redeem thrones stained by lust and murder.

St. Stephen of Hungary, whose feast is kept on September 2nd throughout the Latin Church, gave a perfect example of holy wedded life. He was married to Gisela, sister of St. Henry the Emperor, and by her was father of Blessed Emeric, or Imre, who predeceased his parents. Stephen died before Gisela in 1038 and was canonised forty-five years later.⁸ Gisela's brother cannot be included here because of the alleged compact of perpetual virginity he made with his wife St. Cunegunde; although the tradition is historically doubtful, dating nearly one hundred and fifty years after his death in 1024. For the same reason we must omit St. Edward the Confessor, although the tradition here, whilst less weak historically, is not altogether satisfactory. Too often do pious biographers, more especially those remote from their saint's period, deduce from a fruitless marriage a compact of virginal wedlock; and sometimes in the case of an only child they imagine an agreement of future continency. I cannot but suspect this to be the case in the alleged pact between St. Isidore the farm-hand and his wife Blessed Mary Cabezas, seeing that the fact is mentioned for the first time in 1622 by a Dominican (James Bleda) five centuries after Isidore's death.⁹

Contemporaries in the thirteenth century were the saintly kings Ferdinand II of Castile and Lewis IX of France. Both were strong rulers and great crusaders, the former against the Moors, whom he

⁶ Butler, ii. 40; Holweck.

⁷ Butler, iv. 345; Holweck; Acta SS. April, t. iii. 79.

⁸ Butler, ix. 16.

⁹ Acta SS. May. t. jii. 550.

succeeded in driving out of the greater part of Spain and pinning them down to the south-eastern corner of the peninsula. Ferdinand was twice married, first to Beatrice, the saintly daughter of the Emperor, Philip of Suabia, and secondly to a French princess, Jane of Ponthieu. Beatrice bore him five sons and a daughter (some authorities say seven sons and three daughters), and Jane gave him two more sons and a daughter. Ferdinand died at the age of fifty-four in 1232, and was canonised in 1671.¹⁰ St. Lewis, who died in 1270, was married to Princess Margaret of Provence, who survived him, and by whom he became father of five sons and six daughters. Lewis, who was canonised in 1297, only twenty-seven years after his death, has his feast on August 25th, Ferdinand on May 30th.¹¹

Although it is not certain whether they died married or as widowers there seems sufficient reason to include in our list two other saintly rulers, for it is obvious that their sanctity was won in marriage. These saints are Ladislaus, King of Hungary, and Leopold, Margrave of Austria. The former, although said by some biographers to have remained unwed, actually married Adelaide, daughter of the Duke of Bavaria, and had a daughter Pyrisca, married to John the Beautiful, Emperor of the East. This princess, on her marriage, changed her name to Irene and is venerated by the Greeks as a saint. She predeceased her husband. Her father Ladislaus was canonised by Pope Celestine III in 1192.¹²

Leopold of Austria married Agnes, daughter of the Emperor Henry IV, already a widow with two children, and she bore him eighteen more. Leopold, who died in 1136, was canonised by Innocent VIII in 1485, and his feast falls on November 15th.¹³

Margaret, Queen of Scotland, the last of the Saxon royal line, deserves to rank as patron of married women second only to St. Monica. She died on November 16th, 1093, only three days after the treacherous slaying of her husband at Carlisle. She was in her forty-eighth year, and the mother of six sons and two daughters. Pope Innocent IV canonised her in 1252.¹⁴

There is a tradition that Blessed Luchesio and his wife Bonadonna, provision dealers in Poggibonsi, were the first Franciscan Tertiaries, being received into his Third Order by St. Francis himself. Luchesio survived his wife only a few weeks, dying in 1260. His cult was

¹⁰ Butler, v. 362; Acta SS. May. t. vii. 600.

¹¹ Butler viii. 294.

¹² Butler vi. 358; Holweck.

¹³ Butler ix. 190.

¹⁴ Butler vi. 128.

approved by Innocent XII in 1694.¹⁵ One of the earliest Dominican Tertiaries, Blessed Zedislava, is one whose life fittingly answers our question. Married to a Bohemian nobleman named Gallo, a man of harsh and brutal temper, she rendered him patient by her obedience and docility. To him as he knelt in tears round her death-bed with their young children she promised to be more useful after her death than she could have been in life; and is said to have appeared to him shortly after in glory. She was beatified by Pope Pius X in 1907, no less than six and a half centuries after her death in 1252. Her feast is January 3rd.¹⁶ Another Dominican Tertiary, a young married woman of Florence named Villana de Bottis, who died in 1360 aged only twenty-eight, was beatified by Leo XII in 1824, and her feast assigned to February 28th.¹⁷

We cannot do better than conclude with a word on two married saints at the opposite ends of society: Blessed Maria Christina, Queen of Naples and Sicily, and Blessed Anna Maria Taigi, wife of a domestic servant, who lived often in dire poverty. The holy Queen died from the effects of childbirth in 1836 and her cause was brought before the Holy See in 1859; and in 1872 Pius IX allowed her cult.¹⁸ Blessed Anna Maria, a Tertiary of the Order of Trinitarians, died a year later. She suffered much from her husband's unemployment and consequent bad temper, and yet in this hard life and burdened with the rearing of a large family of children she reached marvellous heights of sanctity and all through this period enjoyed the highest mystical favours. Pope Benedict XV beatified her in 1920.¹⁹

Space forbids mention of further examples, but those already given will, we feel confident, more than suffice to answer affirmatively the question: Are there any married saints?

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¹⁵ Holweck; Fr. Léon, *Lives of Franciscan Saints*, Engl. Trans. ii. 131.

¹⁶ *La B. Zedislava*, by I. Taurisano, O.P., Florence, 1909; Holweck.

¹⁷ Taurisano, O.P., *Catalogus Hagiographicus O.P.*, Rome, 1918, p. 29.

¹⁸ Holweck; *Catholic Encyclopaedia*.

¹⁹ Butler, vi. 9.