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The Church: Paradox and Mystery

Translated from the French by
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Holiness in Future

Dear friend,

You ask me what in my opinion will be the characteristic features of holiness in the future. Well, in my opinion, your question cannot be answered. I am no prophet—and I doubt greatly that the prophets themselves could give you an answer.

What new forms will sanctity take in the future? The question goes beyond the scope of forecast or prophecy: prophets never discerned in advance the contingent forms of the great realities they were foretelling. 'Each saint's life is like a new blossoming, an effusion of a miraculous, Eden-like ingenuousness' (Bernanos). Holiness is the work of the Holy Spirit who is not 'this pale, insipid, timeless sun of enlightened reason', who never was and never will be: the Spirit is he who breathes where he will, when he will, as he will. He is liberty, innovation itself, the eternal and intangible innovation of God.

After the event, no doubt, there will be no dearth of explanations. One might enumerate all sorts of reasons, objective or simply ingenious, for the newness of an Augustine, a Francis of Assisi, an Ignatius of Loyola . . . And with a little hindsight, there should not be too much difficulty in showing how this newness was written into the history of Christian cultures, how it shaped them, made them productive, determined their orientation, sometimes for centuries afterwards. Before the event, however, before the budding, who could have described the new blossoming? Who could have foreseen what the individual contribution of an Augustine, a Francis, an Ignatius would be? Similarly, none of us today can seriously venture to sketch, in detail, the portraits of the saints of tomorrow.

On the other hand, it should not be too difficult to indicate certain characteristics which they will *not* have, an exercise which should not be brushed aside as useless. They will not, to begin with, be ideologists. They will not try to define or, to realize in themselves, 'a new type of saint'—any more than a

new kind of priest or layman. If they accomplish great things it will not be by dissertations on the courage to dare. If they bring something truly new to the world, if they open up to it fresh perspectives, it will not be by means of wordy generalities on the necessity to create and invent. They will not think to yield to an infantile need for security in attaching themselves to the Church's tradition: this tradition will be a source of strength, not a millstone round their necks.

Perhaps some of them will be reformers who will have to show themselves strict; but none of them will be compulsive critics of what has gone before, their strictness will not be negative, their work of reform will not have a basis of resentment. They will have no time for the facile and erroneous dichotomies set up by men without experience and knowledge of history between the love of God and love of the neighbour, between prayer and action, between the interior life and presence in the world.

They will not confuse the openness of life with the dissolution and disintegration of death, nor the idolatry of man with brotherly charity. They will entertain no pretentions of going one better than the gospel . . . Unlike the cases of some epochs of the 'mystical invasion', the true contemplatives will manage to avoid the cerebral game of 'super-essential and pre-eminent sublimities'; they will learn, if they give themselves the trouble, to construct no less sublime phraseologies in their own field whose simplicity will have nothing in common with those constructions that our present age is tireless in erecting and whose most obvious result is to tear us away from the divine simplicity of the faith and the Christian life. Among them will be found, no doubt, learned and not so learned; but even the most learned and those most spontaneously in tune with all the human progress of their time will entertain no feelings of superiority in their faith, over the believers who have gone before them. As for the less learned, they will be able to say to all who wish to listen, without suffering from any feeling of inferiority, in the words of an early Christian: 'We argue little, but we live'.

A very negative outline, you may well say! But it does not pretend to be anything else. All it is is a negation of some negative traits that had to be disposed of at the beginning to prevent huge

errors later on. What then will he be, this saint we are looking forward to? Who, or what, will bring him to us? After what I have just said, do you imagine that I would like to condemn him to being a carbon-copy of the saints of the past? On the contrary! It is because our present epoch is undergoing change more extensive and bewildering that any other before it that the task you have set me appears doubly impossible.

It is not only a question of trying to gauge while the always unpredictable inventions of the Spirit remain an unknown quantity; one has also to speculate on the character and needs of an era beyond one's own. A daring prospect, indeed! What we may be certain of is that the saint of tomorrow will scarcely conform to our ideas, forecasts or desires in his regard. When he appears he may even shock us. He will certainly disconcert us. If God raises him up in our midst we shall be tempted to reject him—unless, as may happen, we pass by and do not see him . . . But he will have his revenge.[1]

I speak of the future, but what I have just said pertains to that part of history that is always beginning again; the part of old, unredeemed man. In his double novelty our saint will also be a man of all times, though in quite a different sense: a doubly new manifestation of that unique new Man who, not being in time, does not repeat the past, but remains a man for all times since, through the vicissitudes of history, he reflects the eternal.[2]

This new man, this saint, so different as he will have to be from his predecessors, will nonetheless reproduce their essential characteristics and it is on these that we may confidently base our predictions. He will be poor, humble, dispossessed. He will have the spirit of the beatitudes. He will neither curse nor flatter; he will love. He will take the gospel at the letter, that is,

1. 'Most people do not understand a saint, and even St. Paul and St. John would not seem to be ordinary men. And yet . . .': Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 3, 252.

2. Cf. Roger Schutz, *Unanimité dans le pluralisme* (Les Presses de Taizé, 1966): 'What fires us as Christians is the communication of Christ to man. What concerns us most deeply is the advancement of man to God, his spiritual advancement as well as his human . . . But if in our generous openness to man, the signs of other-worldliness disappear from our common vocation, then all we shall be able to show is a special capacity for participation in the contemporary world . . . What we shall not be able to show to men is the event of God, his transcendence, his vertical inrush on the soul . . . A contemplative life that is not integrated is no longer grasped by modern man. But neither is the Christian recognized who allows himself to be wholly absorbed by the human milieu.'

in all its rigour. A hard asceticism will have liberated him from himself. He will be heir to all the faith of Israel but will remember that it has passed through Jesus. He will take up the cross of his saviour and will force himself to follow in the saviour's steps. In his own fashion, something again unforeseeable, he will say to us what a Clement of Alexandria said to the men of *his* time: 'A light has shone in our heaven, brighter than the sun's, softer than our life here below', and it will be a ray of this brightness that he will shed over our night.

Intelligent he will be beyond doubt, the most human of humans, of simple culture perhaps, like a Foucauld, or refined, like a Monchanin. An exceptional human being, he will nonetheless be a stimulating example for our mediocre humanity. Fallible like all men but docile to the Spirit, he will share in the discernment promised to the Church and will not be dismayed at even the most radical renewals nor captivated by treacherous novelties. Like so many of his predessors, by new actions appropriate to the new situations, he will be the defender and support of the oppressed. Perhaps, too, he will be a leader of men; perhaps he will be moved, without having wished it, to found a new organization whose daring will, at first, astound all who witness it.

Maybe his will be a role in the public sector of life and *Time* magazine and *Paris Match* and all the other organs of public opinion will have to take note of him. Equally, he may play a lone role, his life lived unnoticed by the mass of ordinary people as by that other 'mass', less numerous than the first but often equally unperceptive and dull, that goes under the name of the 'elite'. It may be that all round him will think him an anachronism. His own people may misunderstand, betray or desert him; that simple, human truth of the gospel is also of always. . . . Under forms and on occasions that lie beyond our ken, he will be plunged into the mystery of suffering, into abandonment, into private solitude—into the nausea of sin. In his turn he will be *another Christ*: not, must we repeat, a man desirous of surpassing Christ but one whose entire life's ideal is to be configured to him.

Then, through him as through his master, and in total dependence on his master, the face of God—I say so advisedly—will appear.

Numerous voices are raised today to explain to us, with more or less learning, that the time for 'ontology' is past; that our belief in a heavenly Father is only a mythical projection; that all our theology should be relegated to the back of the book-shelves or done away with altogether to make way for man. The philosophers who treated of God belonged, it goes without saying, to the world's infancy! But now, of course, we have reached adulthood (since yesterday!) and we ought, with all speed, discard the remnants of primitive thought that still cling to us!

It is explained to us (yet again!) that there is no truth but the 'verifiable', no evidence but the empirical; that the images of Scripture are hiding no reality; that scientific man has bade goodbye to religious man; that our faith is puerile—some make no bones about it and say it is 'infantile'—our hope illusory, Christian charity which we proclaim, an unhealthy exaggeration . . . Submitted daily to this sort of thing, the believer allows himself to be disturbed. Some despair, while others, for a time at least, beguiled by the new myths, close their eyes and take the road to a new capivity in Babylon. It is not always easy to resist such a solid front, to distinguish the true from the false, to see the point where abuse begins, to catch out criticism in its barefaced caricatures—and matters are made no easier by the apparently reasonable forms a spiritual blindness may take!

But let a saint come on the scene . . . and the miracle happens again. 'These times', the Abbé Monchanin confided, 'people have said that they sense God through me . . .' So it was yesterday—and so it will be tomorrow.[3] The veil is suddenly rent. The vista of eternity opens. The night becomes luminous. Formidable criticisms soon appear ridiculous. In the face of such plenitude—of such love—of such joy, everything yields. All negations cancel out before the indisputable Presence. Man breathes again. Of a sudden he senses, before analysing it—and even afterwards it may defy analysis—the religious mediocrity that made him vulnerable to chimerical criticisms, that caused his illness. When a saint passes, it is a call to conversion.

We may expect that this great saint we long for, which 'our age so badly needs', will be a man who walks 'a free and untrodden path, driven by the fullness of the religious vigour of

3. Cf. Teilhard de Chardin: 'to give to God . . . as the saints did . . . a truly real value'.

his time'; unifying and purifying them in himself he will draw the many aimless searchings and wasted energies of his contemporaries to God; for an entire generation he will thus become a clarion call and a leader, a living symbol at that Christian renewal to which all are invited. Such a man it is that we await, and which of us would wish for anyone else?

But do we not sometimes dream of a saint who, at a blow, would transform our social structures? Or a saint who, by some miracle, would initiate that fraternal society or, at least, lay its foundations? Or a saint who would be acknowledged as such, without gross deformation, by public opinion? Or a saint who, cutting through the knot of our contradictions, would lighten our task as men? Perhaps we have even imagined a new kind of sanctity which would not take root in that same soil of sacrifice and would not participate in that destiny as He whose disciples all the saints before now have wished to be? A saint who would not be a sign of contradiction?

If we have thought so, let us reread the gospel and drive out all dreams and forecasts, let us once more take up our modest task as men, and have confidence in God: the race of saints is not at all a disappearing one.