

Chapter 1

The Saint: Beginnings

A Saint is a peculiar being.

John Henry Newman

Alban Butler (1711–73), descended from a distinguished recusant family from Northamptonshire, was sent by his family to the English College at Douai on the continent where he became, in time, one of its professors. Ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1735, he labored, mainly on the continent, but with occasional visits back to England, for thirty years to complete research in order to write his *The Lives of the Saints*, which was published in London in four huge octavo volumes between 1756 and 1759. Subsequent editions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appeared in Dublin and Edinburgh. *The Lives of the Saints* is part of that central library of recusant literature associated with Douai in France, which takes its place with such works as the Douai–Rheims translation of the Bible from the Latin Vulgate (the Roman Catholic alternative to the Authorized Version) and the very popular manual of prayers known as *The Garden of the Soul*. These three works – *The Lives of the Saints*, the Douai–Rheims Bible, and the prayer book – were staples of Roman Catholic life in English-speaking countries well into the twentieth century. My father used a copy of *The Garden of the Soul* (inherited from his father) for his devotions well into the 1960s.

In the twentieth century, there were augmentations and corrections to the original volumes of Butler's *Lives* under various editors, first in 1928 by Herbert Thurston, SJ, and in the 1950s by the same editor and the late Donald Attwater. The last edition in twelve volumes (one for each month of the year) was published in the 1990s under the general editorship of Paul Burns.¹ The work as a whole, edited and updated as it has been, has never gone out of print, even though it has only been this final edition that has appeared in twelve volumes. It will require further updating soon given the pace of canonizations and beatifications under the pontificate of John Paul II.

Butler's *Lives* is organized according to the months of the year. Each day records the saints of the Catholic Church who are venerated either universally in the Roman calendar or locally in a specific geographical area or within a particular religious order. The entries in Butler try to reflect all of the saints who appear in the authoritative Roman martyrology,² although it cannot take into account all the saints beatified or canonized by Pope John Paul II since 1995.

One can open any of the volumes of Butler's *Lives* to any day to see immediately why we can speak of the saints as a "problem" in the sense that one finds it hard, frequently, to know what the persons listed for a given day have in common. The entries for May 30 are not atypical. We commemorate on that day the feast of Saints Basil and Emmelia, whose claim to fame is that they were the parents of four great fourth-century Cappadocian figures: Saints Gregory of Nyssa, Peter of Sebastea, Basil the Great, and Macrina the Younger. The same day also commemorates the seventh-century martyr Saint Dymphna about whom we know nothing; what is told of her in the hagiographical tradition, is, in fact, all derived from folktales. Further, we also note an entry on Saint Hubert, who is alleged to be the founder of the town of Liège in Belgium but whose body is now in the French Ardennes city of St Hubert. He is the patron of hunters (because his life

story was confused with that of Saint Eustace – the conflation of the lives of the saints is not uncommon) and, for unclear reasons, he is traditionally invoked against hydrophobia or rabies. We also honor, on the same day, a Spanish king, Ferdinand of Castile and a little-known English saint from Norfolk named Walstan. Better known, however, is Saint Joan of Arc who was executed for heresy, later rehabilitated, and finally canonized. Her story has so caught the popular imagination that over thirty films have been made of her life dating back to the era of silent movies. She has also been honored by dramatic plays (for example by George Bernard Shaw) and any number of works in sculpture and painting. Joan's life also illustrates the complexity of being named a saint. She was executed as a relapsed heretic on May 30, 1431. In 1456, Pope Callistus III declared that the process that had condemned her had been unjust, but it was not until 1920 that she was canonized in the papacy of Pope Benedict XV.

If, then, one came innocently to those entries in Butler's *Lives* for May 30 it would be reasonable to ask if we were speaking of a single category of person. What could possibly be the link that ties together a medieval Spanish king, a fourth-century husband and wife, semi-legendary figures like Dymphna, who is now associated with help for those suffering mental illness, and a fifteenth-century cross-dressing adolescent who heard heavenly voices (of saints who may or may not have existed in fact) which provoked her to lead an army? The short answer to the question is not much beyond the fact that they are all listed as saints in the Roman martyrology. Indeed, if one is to make any sense out of the category of "saint" as it is traditionally understood in the historic Christian church, or, at a minimum, begin to understand if this heterogeneous collection of edifying tales and moral exempla even add up to what Wittgenstein, in an inspired phrase, calls a "family resemblance," we need to sort out what is, in fact, a very complex and trying story. This first chapter will attempt to set the stage for this extremely convoluted tale.

Beginnings

The word “saint” is part of the common coinage of our language. We say that someone would “try the patience of a saint” or that one’s mother was a saint. In general, the word “saint” in the common vernacular has connotations of forbearance, self-abnegation, and service to others out of love. At a second level, we might also think of church names, figures cast in plaster-of-Paris, pictures in museums of maidens being fed to lions, medallions on chains worn about the neck depicting Saint Christopher, certain holidays like Saint Patrick’s Day, and other ephemera derived from popular Catholicism. Among those Christians who venerate the saints there is also the strong conviction that they can be instructive in attempts to live the Christian life. We learn of love for the natural world from a Saint Francis or bravery in facing a hostile, unbelieving world from the martyrs or how to pray better from spiritual masters and mistresses like the great mystics. Functionally speaking, the saints serve a variety of purposes in the historic Christian church, but taken as a whole they represent a very complex phenomenon.

It is at this second level of discourse that we find the subject of our study. We want to know how these various kinds of saints came to be, what they mean, and how they fit into the larger discourse of Christianity in general (for example, what does the creed mean by the “communion of saints”?) and Catholic Christianity (broadly understood) in particular. To answer such questions, we need both to look back into history and, at another level, to reflect critically. This work, then, has two strains within it: history and theological reflection.

We do find the word “saint” in the vernacular versions of Christian Scriptures. Saint Paul frequently uses the Greek word *agios* as a generic term for members of the early Christian communities. He greets the community at Rome who are “called to be saints” (Rom. 1: 7). He uses a similar phrase in his greeting to the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1: 2) and, in his second letter,

he salutes that church again, adding “all the saints throughout Achaia” (2 Cor. 1: 1). He addresses the “saints who are in Ephesus” (Eph. 1: 1), and further on tells the Gentile members that they are no longer strangers and aliens but “citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2: 19). To the church at Philippi he expands his greeting: “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi” (Phil. 1: 1). A variation of that expanded greeting can be found in Paul’s letter to Colossae: “To the saints and brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae” (Col. 1: 2).

What does Paul mean by this terminology? It seems clear that Paul understands the members of the community to be holy and, in this generic sense, saints. Another way of describing a saint would be, in this sense, to describe a “holy person.” The biblical tradition posits holiness essentially as a characteristic of God. God is holy. Everything else – people, places, things, actions, rites, buildings, books, and so on – become holy to the degree that they are linked to or identified with the holiness of God. When Paul speaks of the “holy ones” (i.e. the saints) of the early Christian communities, he means to say that by their identification with God, through the saving works of Christ, they have become linked to and identified with God and, in this sense, are saints. Holiness, then, is ascribable to a person to the degree that he or she is somehow connected to the source of holiness, which is God. The first letter of Peter makes the point explicitly: “Instead, as he [i.e. Jesus Christ] who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct, for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1: 15–16, quoting Lev. 11: 44–5). In the New Testament, finally, the “saint” is one who merits the name even during life. The “saint” is close to God and those who are not saints (the impious) are not close to God.

This general understanding of “saint” or “holy one” has remained within the Christian community down to the present day. We describe the community as a “communion of saints” and describe the church as holy in the sense that Christians, singly and

in community, are called to be close to God in Christ. The dogmatic constitution on the church (*Lumen Gentium*), promulgated at the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church, asserted that there is a universal call to holiness for everyone irrespective of their state of life.³ It goes on to say that the clearest proof of this holiness in the Christian community “is brilliantly proved by the lives of so many saints in church history” (*Lumen Gentium* no. 40). Not to put too fine a point on it: all are called to be saints, but in the history of the Christian tradition some people are distinguished by their holiness and those people are the “saints” in the more restrictive sense. It is to that category of person that this study addresses itself.

We should further stipulate that the place of saints is a conspicuous part of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran life, while other church bodies with roots in the sixteenth-century Reformation either ignore or militate against any special class of persons who are called “saints” in the restrictive sense in which we will use the term. How these distinctions came into play will be discussed in their proper place in subsequent chapters of this book. This short history of the saints will deal, then, with both the maintenance of the saintly tradition and its sloughing off in certain forms of Christianity.

The Second Vatican Council’s dogmatic constitution on the church (*Lumen Gentium*) gives us a clue about how this publicly and liturgically recognized category of saints emerged in the Christian church. After glossing the various paths of Christian holiness, *Lumen Gentium* goes on to say: “From the earliest times, then, some Christians have been called upon – and some will always be called upon – to give this supreme testimony of love for all people, but especially to persecutors. The church, therefore, considers martyrdom as an exceptional gift and as the highest proof of love” (no. 42). The phrase “from earliest times” indicates a path mark for us because it is in the experience of the early Christian martyrs that the whole history of devotion to the saints, and their place in the Christian experience, begins.

The Martyrs

It is an incontestable fact that the early Christian movement suffered persecution at the hands of the authorities of the Roman empire, which continued in fits and starts within the generation after the earthly life of Jesus and continued down until the early fourth century.⁴ Tradition has it that there were ten periods of persecution, but that may be a pious fiction in order to have the Christian persecutions somehow mirror the ten plagues of the Old Testament. The periods of persecution and their intensity were episodic, flaring up in this or that particular place in the empire. Roman writers attest to such persecutions. Tacitus, writing in the *Annales* early in the second century, describes the Christians – for whom he held no love – as becoming scapegoats for the burning of the city during the reign of Nero. They were worried to death by wild dogs or set alight as living flambeaus in Nero's circus. Early in the second century, Pliny the Younger wrote to the emperor from near the Black Sea, describing his handling of Christians found in his area of jurisdiction: if they did not worship the genius of the emperor, he had them executed.

It was only in the middle of the third century, in the year 250 during the reign of the emperor Decius, that there was an empire-wide persecution of Christians, triggered by a decree that in that year all persons were to honor the Roman gods by public acts of homage in a temple and by obtaining a certificate to that effect. In the latter half of the third century and early in the fourth century, under the emperors Valerian and Diocletian, there were similar widespread acts against the Christians. These large persecutions came after nearly two centuries of anti-Christian legislation and punishment in various parts of the empire. The best evidence is that, apart from these widespread campaigns, the persecutions of Christians were episodic, local or regional, albeit, at times, ferocious.

What caused the Christians to be the subject of Roman persecution? The issue is not all that clear. What is clear is that just

being a “Christian” from the time of Nero was sufficient cause for state intervention. It is most likely that the Romans saw the Christians as undermining the civic virtue of *pietas*: that mixture of love and fear that ideally reigned in the Roman family as children showed *pietas* to their parents, which the family, in turn, showed to the state, and the state manifested to the gods. The Christian refusal to render such *pietas* to the gods seemed, from the Roman point of view, to be an act of treason: a fifth column of dissidents who eroded the *pax deorum*, that peace of the gods which alone guaranteed the stability and flourishing of the Roman state. In short, despite the efforts of second-century Christian writers like the apologist Justin (who himself died in Rome as a martyr in 165 AD), who argued that Christians could be good citizens despite their abstinence from Roman religious rites, the Christians were seen as a dangerous sect at odds with the commonweal.

Looked at from the vantage point of the success of Christianity in the West, it is difficult for people nowadays to grasp that early Christianity was a counter-cultural force at odds with the regnant sentiments of their contemporaries. The Christians became easy targets for popular discontent. As the powerful third-century rhetorical writer in North Africa, Tertullian, put it: “If the Tiber has overflowed its banks, if the Nile has remained in its bed, if the sky has been still, or the earth been in commotion, if death has made its devastations, or famine its afflictions, your cry immediately is ‘Christians to the lions!’” (*Apology* no. 40). Tertullian knew of what he spoke since his native city of Carthage in North Africa had long experience of Christian persecution.

It was only in the early fourth century, with the Edict of Toleration issued by the emperor Constantine in Milan, that the age of the martyrs came to a close. By that time the role of the martyrs had already taken a cultural and theological contour that would contribute to the future shape of the Christian understanding of saints and their significance in the larger Christian

theological and devotional life. A number of factors contributed to that understanding.

Literature

First, an enormous literature, developed by the Christian community in response to Roman persecution, began to take shape quite early. That literature took various forms. The second-century apologists addressed the Roman public with at least two lines of argument to counter the official persecution of the Christians by government intervention: that what the Christians believed (despite scurrilous rumors about sexual orgies, secret plotting, and even cannibalism) was not immoral or poisonous to the common good and, further, that the Christian unwillingness to honor the Roman deities did not a priori mean that they were bad citizens or, worse, subversive enemies of the Roman state. Some of that literature had a polemical edge to it as these early writers not only argued for the benign character of Christian teaching but, in the process, advanced the idea that pagan religion was grossly deficient and pagan philosophy at best a preparation for the Gospel or that the best of pagan thought actually derived from the Bible. The most well known of these apologies, written by the second-century Justin Martyr, exemplifies this approach. That he bears the title “martyr” indicates that he was not all that persuasive since he was executed as a Christian in Rome around the year 165.

A quite different kind of literature also grew up in the second century. This literature was a kind of memory bank produced by early Christian communities to keep the recollection of those who suffered alive.⁵ The earliest strata of that literature are the so-called *Acta* of the judicial processes by which the Christians were tried and condemned. We possess, for example, the main part of the process which condemned Justin Martyr and six

other Christians. The text consists of a brief interrogation which determined that the seven were Christians and would not sacrifice to the gods. The sentence was brief and to the point: "Let those who will not sacrifice to the gods and yield to the command of the emperor [i.e. Marcus Aurelius the famous Stoic] be scourged and led away to be beheaded in accordance with the law."

A second, more full kind of literature is known as the *Passio* or the *Martyrium*. These are elaborated texts that describe the sufferings of the martyr(s) in some detail; often one finds an echo of the *Acta* embedded within these texts. What makes these *Passiones* of considerable interest is that they were written by one church community for the sake of another to provide an account of a martyr's death; that is, they were a kind of encyclical letter meant to be read aloud in Christian communities. As a consequence, these documents give us some insight into what the early community thought about the significance of those who witnessed unto death. Several of these texts have taken on classic status in early Christian literature. *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, for example, is a third-century text (compiled by Tertullian himself?) which, in part, is autobiographical, which means that it is, at least in part, the earliest known Christian text written by a woman – the Perpetua of the title. The full text describes the condemnation of a young noble woman, Perpetua, and her servant, Felicity, as well as some others who were exposed to the wild beasts in the circus of Carthage. The text, with its dream sequences and theological reflections, has received intense interest from scholars. The one thing that is very clear is that both Perpetua and Felicity were central to the story and cast in an heroic mold.

Of particular interest for our purposes is the second-century text known as *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written by the church community at Smyrna to the church at Philomelium to describe "those who suffered martyrdom, especially the blessed Polycarp." The text is a narrative of the events leading up to the death of

the aged bishop, but what is more interesting is the theological framework within which the story is told. The writer puts it succinctly: “Almost everything that led up to it happened in order that the Lord might show once again a martyrdom conformable to the Gospel.” In other words, the martyr performed, as it were, an end to life similar to the supreme martyr of the Christian faith, Jesus, who died on the cross under a sentence also pronounced by the Roman authorities. The text is written in such a fashion that it is studded with narrative parallels to the passion of Christ. Hence, the martyr’s death was seen against the template of the passion of Christ who provides the template for giving up one’s life.

This insistence on the martyr’s imitation of Christ is close to another second-century text, the *Letter of Ignatius of Antioch to the Romans* (circa 117 CE). Ignatius, being escorted to Rome to face the emperor and certain execution, writes ahead to the Christian community at Rome: “Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God. I am God’s wheat and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may prove to be pure bread . . . then I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world will no longer see my body.”

These theologically charged reflections on the significance of the martyr’s sacrifice were a kind of homily for a persecuted church: they became a “proof” of the meaning of the life of Jesus and a model for those discipleship instructions that were in the Gospel message.⁶ The theme of the *imitatio Christi* found in these early documents would be a recurring theme in later martyrdom accounts. Finally, these texts hold up the martyrs as models and exemplars of faith which, of course, becomes one component in the development of their cult in subsequent history.

Later elaborations of these *Passiones* became more fictionalized as they exaggerated the sufferings of the martyrs, the demonic opposition of the Romans (and the Jews), and the miraculous powers of the saints to withstand pain, thwart the persecutors, and exhibit the presence of God’s power among them. Such

stories known as *legenda* (literally: matters read aloud) would evolve, as we shall see, into the tradition of hagiography.

Veneration

There is no doubt that those who did die for the sake of the faith were highly venerated in the Christian community. The literature that grew up about them is proof enough of that fact. A further proof is that when their bodies were recovered after execution they were given special attention both in terms of their burial and also in the honor paid to the places where they were interred. This custom has deep historical roots in the Christian tradition. The second-century text *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* notes that the witnesses to the saint's death buried his body in a suitable place with the hope that "the Lord will permit us, as far as possible, to gather together in joy and gladness to celebrate the day of his martyrdom as a birthday [*dies natalis*], in memory of those athletes who have gone before, and to train and make ready those who come thereafter."

The veneration of the martyrs at their tombs was an extension of the Roman custom of memorializing their dead on an annual basis. What was new in the practice of the Christians was to observe the date of the martyr's death as a "birthday," i.e. that day in which they were born anew into the realm of God. This veneration had a deep religious significance evidenced by the fact that the same *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was quick to point out to some Jews of Smyrna, who accused them of abandoning Christ, that they observed the cult of the martyrs "because of their unsurpassable devotion to their own King and Teacher" who were "disciples and imitators of the Lord."

As the list of martyrs became longer, the calendar of those commemorated also grew. Early liturgical texts indicate that observances at the tombs of the martyrs included readings (from the *Passiones*?), psalms and prayers, and possibly the celebration

of the Eucharist. By the middle of the fourth century, we have a list of those martyrs who were commemorated in Rome on an annual basis (the so-called *Depositio Martyrum*) with similar lists compiled in cities like Antioch and Carthage. It is from this practice that, in time, there developed a cycle of saintly veneration that meshed with the larger liturgical cycle of the church. One scholar has pointed out that the Roman *Depositio Martyrum* begins, fittingly enough, on December 25 with the birthday of Jesus – the model for all Christian martyrs.⁷

From this slow evolution of the veneration of the martyrs certain other practices developed. Until the early fourth century, when Christianity gained its legitimacy and the persecutions ended, the martyrs were buried in Christian-maintained cemeteries. In Rome and a few other places, these cemeteries were cut as underground galleries in the soft volcanic rock known as *tufa* or, in the case of similar galleries in Sicily, quarry tunnels. Most of the many people buried in these cemeteries (known to us as “catacombs” which was originally the name of one such cemetery: *ad catacumbas*) died of natural causes. Those spots that housed martyrs were so marked. The periodic raids of barbarians from the north at the close of the late antique period led the Roman church authorities to re-bury the remains of martyrs inside the city walls in churches or shrine chapels erected for that purpose. When feasible, churches were built over the burial spots so that these ecclesiastical buildings also marked the catacombs.⁸

The Roman cemeteries fell into disuse for centuries. It was only in the sixteenth century that many of the underground galleries were rediscovered and explored, and it was well into the early nineteenth century that there was anything like a scientific archaeological methodology developed to understand the character and significance of these early burial places. Unfortunately, the sixteenth-century discovery of the catacombs gave rise to the notion that everyone buried in them had fallen during the Roman persecutions. This misapprehension and the added idea that Christians hid in the galleries of the catacombs and worshiped

there in secret (they did hold services in the catacombs on the *dies natalis* of a martyr or in commemorative rites for family members) were reinforced in the nineteenth century by a plethora of romantic novels depicting life in the “church of the catacombs” (Newman’s *Callista* is a fair example of the genre).

A particularly interesting case of fictional elaboration with respect to the martyrs occurred in the nineteenth century when a tomb was discovered in the catacombs of Priscilla in Rome with a somewhat garbled epitaph. It was understood to read “Peace to you Filumena.” Inside the tomb was an ampulla thought to contain dried blood and some bones. These relics were transferred to the Italian town of Mugnano where Filomena was venerated as a virgin martyr (a pious priest even wrote a “biography”) with miracles reported at her tomb shrine. Pius IX even authorized a mass and office to be established in her honor and Filomena soon became a favorite first name for young girls, especially in Italy. Only subsequently did research indicate that the archaeological evidence was tendentious at best. In 1961 the Vatican suppressed her feast day (August 11) and struck her name from the catalog of saints.

An even more curious case resulted from the shipment of some relics from a Roman catacomb to a religious house in Paris. Misreading the label on the box, the recipients translated *spedito* (“sent”) as the saint’s name, thus giving rise to the fictional military saint who was given the Latin name Expeditus who remained in the calendar of saints until modern times.

After Constantine

The emperor Constantine brought toleration for the Christians in the Roman empire with the Edict of Milan in AD 313, just a decade after one of the most ferocious periods of persecution under the emperor Diocletian which went on intermittently from AD 303 to the accession of Constantine to the imperial purple. In

the period after Constantine, the veneration and liturgical of the sainted martyrs was a well-established part of Christian life. Constantine himself paid fair tribute to the practice by, among other things, underwriting the erection of a large basilica over the tomb of Saint Peter on the site of the shrine (*tropheum*) where his remains were venerated. A less-reliable tradition ascribes to Constantine the basilica of Saint Paul-outside-the-Walls over the remains of the apostle to the Gentiles.

One might well have expected the naming and veneration of saints to have ceased with the end of the Roman persecutions but an interesting shift took place. If one wanted to categorize the periods of Christian history by ideal types, then the first four centuries comprised the age of the martyrs, which was then replaced by the age of the ascetics and the monks. By the fourth century, the veneration of the martyrs had rooted itself in both the popular Christian practice of piety and in the emerging shape of the liturgical life of the church. Prayers and liturgies at the tombs of the martyrs were considered to be extremely efficacious and the bodies and other relics of the saints were thought to be loci of sacred power. The veneration of martyrs' relics had already been noted in the second-century *Martyrium Polycarpi*, where the remains of Polycarp were described as more precious than gems or gold. Both Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine would later argue for the legitimacy of such veneration.

Augustine, in his *Confessions*, famously describes his own mother, Monica, as a regular visitor to the shrine of the third-century martyr Saint Cyprian in Carthage. When Ambrose, bishop of Milan, discouraged such practices due to excesses, Augustine noted that Monica gave up the custom and now saw "the wisdom of bringing to the martyrs' shrines not a basket full of the fruits of the earth but a heart full of more purified offerings, her prayers" (*Confessions* VI: 2).

The natural successors of the martyred saints were the ascetics and monks.⁹ In his classic *Life of Antony*, written in the fourth century, Athanasius says that Antony, through his life of solitary

prayer and asceticism, was a “martyr every day of his life.” Athanasius, of course, fully understood that the word “martyr” means a witness. Athanasius’ *Life of Antony* had an enormous impact on the rise of monasticism. Augustine, in the *Confessions*, tells us how much his *Life* attracted young people who sought out the ascetic life. Antony was widely venerated in the Middle Ages, becoming the subject of any number of famous paintings which delighted in depicting the demonic temptations he suffered in the most vivid fashion. Hieronymus Bosch devoted a famous triptych to this subject, while Matthias Grünewald devoted a panel of his famous Isenheim altarpiece to the same subject. In the nineteenth century, Gustave Flaubert used the struggles of Antony to fuel his imaginative fictional portrait of the saint in his novel *La Tentation de St Antoine*.

In some now classic studies, Peter Brown has shown how these holy men and women of late antiquity were seen as conduits of divine power and resources of wisdom and healing. Their very lives were considered to exemplify the virtues, graces, and redemptive power of Christ himself who was the exemplar par excellence of the martyr and ascetic.¹⁰

Athanasius’ *Life of Antony* was only the first of a whole spate of popular books on the great ascetics and monastics which appeared in late antiquity. Saint Jerome wrote a somewhat fanciful life of the first hermit, Paul of Thebes (died 340?), who was said to be a friend of Saint Antony of the Desert. The monastic founder Pachomius (died 346) inspired a number of lives which have come down to us both in Coptic and Greek. Saint Gregory of Nyssa wrote a life of his sister, Macrina, shortly after her death in 397. In the early fifth century, Palladius compiled his *Lausiac History*, chronicling the lives of the Egyptian monks of the Thebiad. A century later, Cyril of Scythopolis composed his *Lives of the Palestinian Monks*, drawing on his experiences as a monk in the environs of Jerusalem. Finally, while not strictly biographical, the “Sayings of the Desert Fathers” (*Apophthegmata*

Patrum), an alphabetical collection of the aphorisms, sayings, and spiritual advice of the desert fathers, compiled in the early sixth century but echoing an oral tradition that goes back into the fourth, has had a continuous and important influence on subsequent generations of Christians both in the East and the West. All of these works held up the ascetics as models of Christian witness.

Perhaps the most extravagant of the early ascetic saints were those who lived on platforms on pillars known as the *stylites*. Open to the weather, they not only devoted their lives to prayer but were famous for their spiritual advice. Attended by disciples who would send up food and other basic necessities, these ascetics lived, as it were, suspended between heaven and earth. They flourished in the Middle East and Greece well into the early Middle Ages. The purported founder of this tradition was the Syrian Saint Simeon Stylites (died c.459) who, after a conventional life as a monk, lived on an elevated platform until his death. He carried on a vast correspondence, attracted hordes of pilgrims and spiritual seekers (including many non-Christians), and inspired a monastery and church around his pillar, the remains of which can be seen to this day.

The writings about the lives of both martyrs and ascetics borrowed from earlier biblical and Hellenistic models of the biographies of exemplary figures. The Bible was an obvious source of inspiration where one could find narrative lives of figures such as Moses and Joseph. Furthermore, there were martyrdom templates to be found in such exemplary lives as those who died in defense of Judaism, such as Rabbi Eleazer (2 Macc. 6) and the pious Jewish mother and her seven sons whose martyrdom was described in 2 Maccabees 7. The Book of Ecclesiasticus (not considered canonical by the Reformation) has seven long chapters praising the ancestors of Judaism. In addition to these biblical sources, there were also the many aretologies and “lives of illustrious men” that were part of the pagan literary inheritance.¹¹

In the post-Constantinian period it became quite common for people to travel in order to visit famous solitaries in their desert dwellings or, in not a few cases, to consult pillar-dwelling ascetics. With the support of Constantine's mother, Helena, not only was there a whole series of buildings and shrines constructed to commemorate the places in ancient Palestine associated with the life of Jesus but that same area became a magnet for those seeking the solitary life. The pilgrimage treatise of the Spanish holy woman, Egeria, written in the late fourth century, narrates her long trip through Egypt, the Holy Land, Edessa, Asia Minor, and Constantinople. A crucial resource for understanding the fourth-century liturgy in Jerusalem, it is also valuable as she frequently notes the presence of ascetics and monks of both sexes who lived in the areas she visited.

In the West, the most famous saint of the late fourth century was Martin of Tours (died c.397). Born in Hungary, he abandoned his life as a soldier and, after a period as a hermit, he entered the monastic life with Hilary of Poitiers. Famous for his ascetic life and his power as a healer, his biography was written by his disciple Sulpicius Severus while Martin was still alive. That *Vita* became so popular that it served as a kind of model for hagiographical writing well into the Middle Ages and contributed to the cult of Martin who became one of the favored saints of Europe.¹² Four thousand parish churches in France alone were dedicated to him (as well as five hundred villages which bore his name). Pilgrimages to his shrine in Tours were popular well into the sixteenth century. Interestingly enough, the life of Martin strongly emphasized the saint's miraculous powers, comparing him favorably to the exemplary ascetics of the Egyptian deserts.

There was nothing like any formal canonization process in the first millennium of Christian history. Veneration of the saints developed from the ground up and usually followed a typical pattern. A certain person was conspicuous for ascetic practices, wise counsel, heroic fidelity to prayer, and, most of all, thau-

maturgical powers. Such a person was sought out during his or her lifetime. When the person died, the person's grave site became a place of prayer. If such a practice persisted, a shrine was built over the tomb or the body was relocated to a church. People would come for private devotions and the shrine place came under the protection of monastic or clerical guardianship. In connection with the shrine place, it would be natural enough to have special pilgrimages on the anniversary of the person's death.

If there was one central element in the continuation of a cult in favor of the saints it was to be found in their ability to perform miracles in their lifetime and, more importantly, after their death. Their shrines provided a link between the earthly and the heavenly. Their place in heaven was a pledge of what those on earth could hope to gain. Writing in the fifth century, Saint Maximus of Turin put the latter succinctly: "All the martyrs are to be honored by us especially in this life and especially those whose relics we possess; they preserve us in our bodies in this life and receive us when we depart hence."

In this central role of the power of the saints to aid those on earth by saintly intervention, it is worthwhile to note the work of the sixth-century bishop of Rome, Gregory the Great (died 604). A prolific writer, often called the last of the Western Fathers, Gregory wrote a rather prolix work about 593 known as *The Dialogues*. In this work, divided into four books, Gregory recounts the lives and miracles of a number of saints who lived in Italy to show that the miraculous was still flourishing in the Italy of his day. *The Dialogues'* greatest claim to fame is to be found in Book II, which is the only source we have for the life of Saint Benedict of Nursia, now regarded as the founder of Western monasticism. *The Dialogues* was one of the most read books of the Middle Ages (it was at least partially inspired by Sulpicius Severus' earlier life of Martin of Tours). What is most interesting about it for our story is that one of its purposes was to argue that great sanctity and the presence of the miraculous

had not died out in previous times but was still very much alive in the works of the saints which Gregory described in his work.

Gregory's *Dialogues* also shows a fascination for and an understanding of the power inherent in the relics of the saints. Gregory's interlocutor in the *Dialogues* ask why relics sometimes are the occasion of greater miracles than those performed at the tomb of a saint. Gregory explains that a person praying before distant relics of a saint "earns all the more merit by his faith, for he realizes that the martyrs are present to hear his prayers even though their bodies happened to be buried elsewhere."¹³

It was the same pope Gregory who sent the monk Augustine to England to evangelize the island. In 601, four years after Augustine began his missionary work, Gregory sent the monk Mellitus to assist in the task of evangelization. In a letter recorded in Bede's eighth-century *A History of the English Church and People*, Gregory suggested a missionary strategy that sheds some light on the cult of the saints in relation to the pagan past of Europe. Gregory tells Mellitus that when they come across pagan temples the idols are to be smashed but the temples themselves are to be re-consecrated for Christian use with altars to be set up and relics of the saints set into the former temples (presumably into the altars themselves). Furthermore, if there has been a custom of sacrificing animals on a certain day in honor of the pagan idols, those days should be changed: "Let some other solemnity be substituted in its place, such as a day of Dedication or the Festivals of the holy martyrs whose relics are enshrined there" (Book I, chapter 30).

The interesting thing about this pastoral advice is that it helps us to put the widespread popularity of the cult of the saints into some kind of cultural context. The ancient world was a world that was alive with powers, forces, spirits, and gods. It was a world saturated in the spiritual. In a sense, the cult of the saints was a form of replacement for the powers of various pagan tutelaries and gods. The healing shrines, the sacred wells, the

temples of the members of the pagan pantheon had now been replaced by the power of the saints who had overcome these pagan divinities and sublunar powers. The fact that Christianity was spreading did not in any way erase the older conviction that the wall between the visible and the spiritual was rather permeable.

There was always the danger (and sometimes the danger was realized) that the saints would simply become new names for old pagan divinities and that the search for miracles would degenerate into magical practices. This was a fear expressed as late as Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* in the sixteenth century (and made much of in the polemics of the Reformation), but it was not something about which the patristic church was insensitive. Augustine of Hippo's massive work *The City of God* was centrally concerned with the struggle between paganism and Christianity. In the final book (XXII) of that work, Augustine takes up the issue of miracles done through the intercession of the martyrs both to argue that such miracles had in fact taken place and, further, that they were a sign of approval and a further proof of the redemptive work of Christ. He was so convinced of this that, as he says, he had such accounts of favors received through the intercession of the saints read out to his congregation in Hippo. (The word "legend" originally meant something read aloud; from the Latin *legere* = to read.) Augustine further stipulated that there was no similarity between the works of the saints and those of the pagan divinities:

We do not in those shrines raise altars on which to sacrifice to the martyrs but to the one God who is the martyrs' God and ours; and at this sacrifice the martyrs are named in their own place and in the appointed order, as men of God who have overcome the world in God's name. They are not invoked by the priest who offers sacrifice. He is offering the sacrifice to God and not to the martyrs. (Book XXII, chapter 10)

The saints, in short, were not to be adored; they were invoked as intercessors because they were already where all Christians hope to be: before the throne of God.

The one thing that emerges clearly from this rapid survey is that, by the waning years of the late antique period, the cult of the saints was already well lodged in the practice of Christianity. Born out of the experience of martyrdom, and furthered by the example of the ascetics and the spread of the monastic life, the veneration of the saints was part of the fabric of Christian piety.

In the late antique and early medieval period there was no formal procedure by which one entered the list (canon) of the saints. All that was required to achieve the reputation of being a saint after death was a body or something identified with the person to be venerated, a shrine of some sort, a narrative of the person's life and deeds (it could be something as brief as the acts of the person's condemnation in the case of a martyr), and people who would come to pray at the place where the shrine was located. The overarching criterion marking the desirability of such signs was a continuing indication of the miraculous. The most formal recognition that a person could hope for in addition to those conditions was being placed in the calendar(s) of those who were commemorated publicly in the liturgy of the great centers of the church like Rome or Jerusalem.

One natural consequence of the importance attached to the attractive power of such sacred places where the saints were at rest was that it generated that most persistent of religious activities, already in the late antique period and continuous to the present day: pilgrimage. In the Irish church it was the rare saint, after the time of Patrick, who did not make at least one pilgrimage to Rome with an almost obligatory stop at Tours in Gaul to honor Saint Martin. Pilgrimage was both a penitential exercise imposed at times on a sinner and an ascetical exercise undertaken by monks. For the poor farmer, who could not absent himself for a long trip to Rome, there was always the local shrine or monastic center where one could go and seek the intervention

of the saints and the relics there held.¹⁴ Pilgrimage became so popular in the early medieval period that some of the spiritual writers had to warn about its purely secular popularity; hence the famous Irish poem: “Going to Rome / is lots of effort, little profit. / You won’t find the king you seek there / unless you take him along.”