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Fantastic Saints and Where to Find Them: Why does Sanctity Matter?

Preface to *Profiling Saints*

When we began, during the pandemics, to reflect on the possibility of organizing an online, international conference on Early Modern and Modern Christian sanctity and saints – which we had the pleasure to host in December 2021 – we were confronted with a pressing question: why do these themes still matter today? Communicating the reasons for researching sanctity – and upstream, why do we spend our lives studying what we do? – is of the utmost importance for developing our understanding of a phenomenon that has characterized Christian history since the very beginning, although its meanings, features, and images have changed according to different times and places, over the course of two millennia.

To begin with, Early Modern and Modern saints are not at all *fantastic*, and readers are thus invited to forgive the cinema-inspired joke behind our title. There is a clear distinction between ancient or Medieval saints, who were more creatively imagined than historically framed, and the saints as understood and represented from the 1500s onwards. Modern sanctity required both historical investigations and compliance with a juridical and judicial system that did not exist in earlier eras. Hagiography was born as an attempt to elaborate a science of saints and canonization law developed between the 1600s and 1700s, especially through Urban VIII (1568–1644) and Prospero Lambertini's (future Benedict XIV, 1675–1758) legal reorganization of the cult of the dead and canonization. Modern sanctity is meant to be unassailable: through the centralization and normalization of canonization procedures, the Roman Church responded to the need to regulate local communities and powers as well as the cult of the dead, the latter representing a key factor in the life of Catholics. No *fantastic saints* will be found in this book, but it does sketch many different images of sanctity and saints in a world that, through geographical expansion, religious renovation, and the unravelling of modernity, was relentlessly changing – and sanctity changed along with it. We can read sanctity through a set of lenses that offer us different perspectives and try to integrate these various views for a more comprehensive understanding.

First of all, saints embody imitable models of behaviour of Christian perfection. Starting in the Early Modern Age, such models were identified as heroic; that is to say, saints practiced virtues to a heroic degree but, being only human, through their example offered not only the guidelines needed for other human beings to follow

their lead, but also the hope that Christian perfection is within reach. Throughout the centuries, these behavioural models have changed depending on both the cultural benchmarks of the areas where they were promoted and the strategies of those who postulated for the candidates to sanctity's canonization: in other words, sanctity can be understood as a phenomenon orchestrated "from above", directed by the upper echelons of the Church and its institutions (just think of the religious orders, for example, and their efforts to canonize their own members) and, at the same time, growing up "from below", as a product of the sensibilities of the societies practicing devotion to the dead.

When we observe sanctity as a strategic site of communication, we cannot but notice that hagiographical models launch specific messages, as intended by the postulators of the cause. As such, they constitute powerful means of soft power influencing the societies in question. To illustrate this point, take for example the promotion of the martyrial model in the 1800s, after the revolutionary period and rise of a series of anti-Catholic or anti-Roman cultural and political movements, when the Church aimed to foster the image of a suffering, besieged body. Or the success of the female sanctity model of the good mother fostered in the 1900s. Gianna Beretta Molla (1922–62), the first example that comes to mind, met the Church's need to offer an imitable example of Christian perfection to the lay world in the context of increasingly important Catholic associationism and was deeply caught up with contemporary ongoing discussions about the family and abortion.

On the other hand, when we look at sanctity as a changing phenomenon nourished by the places in which it surfaces, we can better understand not only the devotional side of it – there is no sanctity without devotion – but also how local communities have influenced canonization attempts. Local veneration of the dead is particularly stressed, for example, in cases of missionaries who spent their lives in specific geographical or social contexts. Some popular missionaries were considered living saints by the faithful among whom they preached: the case of Jesuit Francesco De Geronimo (1642–1716) is self-explanatory given that, after his death, devotees dismantled his confessional to take pieces home, and even fed the sick with it begging for miracles through a sort of relic-eating practice. Another example is missionaries who evangelized far-away lands in the age of geographical expansion: to cite another Jesuit, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the evangelizer of China, was proclaimed *venerable* quite recently.

Keeping in mind that every canonization entails a degree of strategy, some cases in particular allow us to analyse how the local communities in which devotion arose considered the candidates to sainthood: what features mattered in the place and time when devotion developed? Which raises the correlated question: what was fundamental for the communities of the faithful, what were their needs, and what did they value as characteristics of holiness? De Geronimo, to clarify with an example, was considered a living saint for many reasons among which his alleged

ability to provoke rain or heal crops, acts that were key necessities in the rural areas where he preached.

In the Catholic panorama, saints, along with the tangible relics of their bodies, provide a connection between this world and the other. Saints have the ability to intercede before God for those who pray to them: they are mediators, they bridge healings and miracles. They are a "hook" pointing upwards, towards Heaven, and give hope to the faithful in need. It is thus no surprise that the culture of sanctity is still key in the Catholic world, that ceremonies of canonization attract waves of pilgrims to Rome, and that devotion towards the saints occupies a seminal place in the life of billions of Catholics around the world. Saints, along with their relics, also have eschatological meaning, as already outlined by Gregory of Tours (539–94): they preview the final times, the last moment, when the saints and others who are saved will stand with God in Heaven. Canonizing a candidate to sainthood means, first and foremost, announcing to the world that he or she is undoubtedly in Heaven.

Sanctity is an ongoing historical, anthropological, legal, social, cultural, liturgical, gendered, emotional, and artistic phenomenon. As such, it deserves to be fully explored from a variety of angles and has attracted the interest of scholars ranging from cultural, legal, and Church historians to experts in liturgical studies or art historians, to name just a few. *Profiling Saints* attempts to offer diverse images and representations of a phenomenon as multifaceted as Modern sanctity, in a global perspective that mirrors the times when it developed, between Europe and overseas.

Exploring sanctity and canonization records, rich with witnesses' depositions, thus offers a chance to observe the development of an amazingly wide array of ideas and practices – from the cult of the dead and their relics to the shaping of behavioural models and the culture of martyrdom, from social, emotional, and gendered practices of sanctity to the artistic representation of saints. We will thus have the opportunity to explore the functioning of different societies around the world in their relationship with the promotion of canonization causes and better understand the choices of the Roman power centres. Sanctity still matters not only by virtue of the undeniable value it holds in the Catholic world, but also because it represents a surprisingly powerful prism through which to observe various facets of religious, social, and cultural history in the course of the Early Modern and Contemporary Age. This awareness was the starting point for inviting scholars from the most diverse of backgrounds to offer their competencies during the intense activities of the abovementioned online conference and now for the realization of this volume.

Fuelled by fruitful and cordial collaboration between the volume editors, the conference *Profiling Saints: Understanding the Theological and Cultural Foundations of Catholic Hagiographical Models (1500s–1900s)* was held online at the end of 2021. The event was successful in terms of participation, and the participants showed

interest in publishing the proceedings – not only the speakers, but also those who attended the international workshop as scholars who have been engaging with the topic for years. Researchers working on the Early Modern Age, with different areas of expertise and academic experience, thus became the authors of this book and enriched the discussion initiated at the conference with new contributions, making the most of an interdisciplinary approach to study a heterogeneous array of topics related to sanctity.

The first and last papers of this volume offer an overview of sanctity in the Early Modern Age. The very idea of sanctity was continually scrutinized, judged, and reformed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as Franco Motta (University of Turin) explains so well in his introductory essay, *Sanctity and Modernity: Opposition or Agreement? An Introduction to Profiling Saints*; its global dimension is underlined in the insightful *Sanctity in a Global World: Continuity and Discontinuity in the Early Modern Age. Conclusions to Profiling Saints* by Sabina Pavone (University of Napoli L'Orientale).

The first section of the book sketches a portrait *Through the Saints: Understanding the Church across the Centuries*, starting from the case of *Temptation, Torture, and Truth: Philip Neri and Reforming Catholic Rome*. Tom Santa Maria (Yale University) clarifies how multiple aspects of Neri's life made him a most fitting candidate for canonization – such as having founded a new religious order, the Oratorians – and Neri thus obtained this status fairly easily and quickly, as part of the famous group of saints canonized in 1622. The timespan of this first sections allows us to appreciate the points of continuity and difference from the Medieval model of sanctity until the Modern Age, thanks also to Stefan Samerski (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich). Samerski asks *What about Saints of the French Revolution? Canonization and Beatification after 1789,* pointing to a fundamental date that deeply influenced the Church's canonization policies. Finally, Joris Geldhof (KU Leuven) offers an overview of the presence of *Modern Saints in the Roman Missal: An Exploration of the Proprium de Sanctis*. The author notes continuities and discontinuities over the centuries (from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries Roman Missals), compares different categories of sainthood and their related prayers, and reflects on them statistically (religious order, gender, geographic and cultural provenance, etc.).

Art history is a marvellous lens through which to appreciate the many, hazy nuances of sanctity, and the second section of this book thus focuses on *Visualizing Sanctity and the Sacred: Images and Promotion*. The Swiss-based group GLOBE-COSAL (Global Economies of Salvation) lays out the aims of their ERC- and SNF-funded research. *Promoting Sanctity by the Means of Artworks,* a collaborative paper written by Raphaèle Preisinger (PI), Hannah Friedman, Jonathan Greenwood, Wei Jiang, and Lucia Querejazu Escobari (University of Zürich), investigates the multiple functions of artwork in the process of negotiating sanctity between Rome and local areas from the 1500s to the 1700s. Rachel Miller (California State

University, Sacramento) reflects on *Imagining the World through St Francis Xavier Imagery: A Case Study in Quito*. Xavier, among the 1622 group of saints, was one of the first two Jesuit saints to be canonized – together with the founder of the order, Ignatius of Loyola. His missionary activities in Japan became famous thanks not only to his own written accounts, but also to multiple artworks depicting him very differently depending on whether they were produced in European or Latin American contexts. Antonio Gerace (Fscire/KU Leuven) and Tamara Dominici (independent researcher) focus on *De picturis et imagines sacris,* published by the theologian Johannes Molanus in 1570. In *From Book to Image. Molanus and the Netherlandish Holy Images*, the authors also highlight the importance of holy images in expressing Catholic devotion.

The third section investigates the *Hagiographical Representations in the Society of Jesus*. Among the many religious orders founded in the sixteenth century, the importance of the Jesuits cannot be overestimated, especially in the fields of pedagogy and missionizing, as well as hagiographical promotion. The names of some of the most important Jesuits – *in primis* Francis Xavier, also known as "the Apostle of the Indies" – thus resurface throughout *Profiling Saints*. Shiri Roelofs (KU Leuven) studies the case of the Jesuit *Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), the Louvain Lectures, and Economic Thought: Image and Impact of a Saint Viewed from an Underestimated Perspective*, focusing on the evolution of Bellarmine's hagiographical model. Carlo Pelliccia (Università degli Studi Internazionali di Roma) publishes the first critical edition of *"Or voi conoscete qual sarà stata la santità del Saverio": The Panegyric by Eriprando Maria Giuliari (1728–1805)*. Both essays show how, even centuries after their death, figures such as Bellarmine and Xavier offered exemplary but extremely different and evolving models of sanctity, with the consequence that their canonizations also took place under various circumstances and in distinct times.

The development of the idea of Early Modern sanctity and hagiographical models is closely related to the history of the Society of Jesus, as the latter is intertwined with the order's Japanese missions. Jesuits were the first Catholics to establish missions in such a distant civilization and, although the first years were depicted as extremely promising by Jesuit sources, Japan was soon recognized as one of the most dangerous and hopeless of such endeavours. In the Early Modern Age, missionaries sent to faraway lands ran the risk – or had the much-hoped-for chance, from their perspective – of suffering a violent death that could be framed as martyrdom and thus trigger a canonization cause. The fourth section focuses on *Martyrs of Japan: Models, Emotions, and the Causes for Beatification and Canonization*. Carla Tronu Montané (Kansai University of Foreign Studies) outlines a complete introduction on sanctity in Japan, from the sixteenth century until recent times. Her *From 'Martyrs of Japan' to 'Japanese Martyrs'*. *Models of Sanctity and Diversity in the Canonization Causes for Martyrs of Japan* shows the importance of approaching such topics not only from a religious perspective, but with an in-depth analysis

of all the elements involved in the bigger picture – and in light of the most recent developments in historical research, such as post-colonial and women's studies. Similarly, the chapter by Linda Zampol D'Ortia (Ca´ Foscari Venezia/Australian Catholic University) uses the promising and relatively recent methodologies of the history of emotions. In *Emotional Practices of Catholic Martyrdom in Early Modern Japan*, the author analyses numerous documents produced by Catholic missionaries to identify the practices that characterized martyrdom models in in the Japanese Catholic community, particularly struck by violent deaths. Hitomi Omata Rappo (Kyoto University) studies the most renowned and celebrated martyrs of Asia: a group of Japanese converts and missionaries whose crucifixion (1597) made a deep impression on Catholics all over the world. In *Profiling the Japanese Martyrs: The Beatification Process of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki (1597–1627)*, she explains why such a tragic event was endorsed with official beatification just a few decades after the event, with processes taking place on a global scale – in Asia, the Americas, and Europe.

The final section, *Vocation to Holiness: Three Case Studies from Early Modern Europe*, deals with three examples of the different possible outcomes when well-known and admired figures died in the odour of sanctity. Beatrice Saletti (University of Ferrara) describes the circumstances of the failed canonization of Lucia da Narni in her chapter *Lucia Broccadelli da Narni in Ferrara: The Short Season of a Saint, the Changing Memories of the Biographers*. The cult surrounding this female figure was sustained for political reasons, and her adventurous story involving kidnapping, faked stigmata, and thousands of pages of personal memories is of the utmost interest today. A similar "unsuccessful" saint is the focus of the chapter by Lucio Biasiori (University of Padua). *Holiness and Madness in Florence* analyses the case of the Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola, hanged and burned at the stake in Florence in 1498, who nonetheless became the object of intense religious devotion – and even an attempted canonization cause. And finally, Patryk Ryczkowski (University of Innsbruck) studies the life and canonization of a martyr of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. *Like the Phoenix into the Ashes: Christological and Jesuit Profile of Uniate Martyrdom in Andrzej Młodzianowski's Emblematic Vita (1675) of Josaphat Kuntsevych (1580–1623)* once again testifies to the complexity and heterogeneity of factors involved in beatifications and canonizations, and shows how they may be pursued via different kinds of agency.

As these chapters clearly show, each author has contributed to the wide array of possible answers to the question at the heart of *Profiling Saints*: What brought certain men and women to the end of the path to sanctity, while others were excluded from it for decades, centuries, or even forever? Many of the "holy" men and women studied in *Profiling Saints*, despite living in the Early Modern Age, were not canonized until recent or very recent times, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: multiple elements converge in advancing or delaying a cause for

canonization, and numerous changes can occur – including in the hagiographical models of sainthood candidates – in the span of time from their death to the first hagiographical descriptions to their (possible) canonization.

The road to sainthood can be long and tortuous, models of sanctity highly diverse, and the elements determining the success or failure of canonization causes widely disparate. What do saints tell us? They set a path, that is the path of Christian perfection, which in turn entails a set of imitable, heroic moral standards. After all, *Profiling Saints* means understanding how and why the Church, both as an institution (including all of its bodies such as the religious orders or dioceses) and as the ensemble of the faithful, fosters accepts, and venerates specific behavioural models with a view to the salvation of the soul. History (in all its facets), hagiography, art, and liturgy: all of these fields of research aid us in grasping the importance of exploring sanctity not only as a religious matter but also – and especially – as a socio-cultural element that has contributed so extensively to making the history of Early Modern Christianity. *Profiling Saints* thus aims to reveal at least part of the amazingly rich sphere of Early Modern and Modern sanctity, complete with many of its representations and images in an ever-changing global world.