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The Birth of Modern Sanctity: The 1622 Canonizations

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We believe that the decision to devote a special issue of the *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* to the canonizations of 1622, the fourth centenary of which was celebrated recently, needs little explanation. For those studying the history of sainthood, its patterns over the centuries, and the procedural changes allowing for its recognition, indeed, the five canonizations of that year – Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, Teresa of Ávila, Philip Neri, and Isidore the Farmer – constituted a fundamental turning point in the history of the Roman Church. As Ronnie Po-chia Hsia has pointed out in his *The World of Catholic Renewal* (2005), a sixth proclamation should ideally be added to the five key cases above, one that preceded them by only a dozen years (1610): that of Charles Borromeo (1538–1584), archbishop of Milan, cardinal, reformer, and champion of the Counter-Reformation and post-Tridentine Catholic renewal.

On one hand, for the Counter-Reformation Church – or Tridentine Church – the canonization ceremony held in 1622 marked the end of a long period of crisis dating back a century or so, to the rise of the Protestant Reformation. Needless to say, rejecting the cult of the saints had been one of the central steps in the formation of Protestant doctrines; it was one of several elements that gravitated around the distinction between the word of Scripture as the authentic source of faith, and the concrete reality of secular traditions Protestantism blamed for corrupting the divine message. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) reaffirmed the validity of the cult of saints and images, as well as the seven sacraments and means of sacramental mediation exercised by the Church such as indulgences, relics, jubilees and the belief in Purgatory. And yet almost sixty years passed from the date that decree was issued during the Council's last session to the proclamations of 1622, pointing to the lengthy phase of reflection in which the Church redrew the contours of its relationship with holiness. The first issue sanctity entailed, as we know, was the balance of power between the center and the periphery, as evidenced by the fact that the 1622 canonizations arrived after a complex period of re-drafting the procedures for recognizing sanctity. This reformulation involved establishing the Congregation of Rites (1588) under Sixtus V (1521–1590, r. from 1585) and creating two

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fundamental hagiographic categories: the blessed, a category introduced during Clement VIII's pontificate that authorized the local, temporary veneration of a person who died in the odor of sanctity and for whom a cause for canonization had been opened, and heroic virtues, introduced under Clement VIII's (1536–1605, r. from 1592) reign indicating that the candidate to sainthood had exercised his or her Christian virtues of perfection to a heroic degree. Both categories were aimed at rendering the steps leading up to the authorization of the cult as rational, clear and verifiable as possible. This procedural re-establishment was implemented first and foremost by centralizing the administration of the sacred in the hands of the Apostolic See, a clear indication that sanctity is closely caught up with the processes of constructing the spiritual sovereignty of the papacy and indeed this sovereignty reached its peak in the decades between the 1500s and the 1600s. Such centralizing reform and redefinition of hagiographical categories did not stop with Sixtus V and Clement VIII, however. Between the 1620s and 1640s, Urban VIII (1568–1644, r. from 1623) reorganized the canonization procedures in legal terms through a key series of reforms making sanctity a primarily inquisitorial matter, depending on the licit or illicit elements of devotees' relationship with those who had died in the odor of sanctity but had not yet been canonized. The Holy See, as the directive center of Catholicity, sought to inject order into local, unregulated expressions of veneration. This process of normalization underwent a further important step with Prospero Lambertini's (later pope Benedict XIV, 1675–1758, r. from 1740) monumental work *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*, composed in the 1730s and destined to serve as the legal foundation of canonization until the 1917 Code of Canon Law.

These reforms established the legal grounds for certifying "true" sanctity in the attempt to discourage improper forms of veneration. Canonized sanctity is not a purely formal or legal matter, however, because it extends beyond devotion alone. Indeed, it must also be understood as closely linked to the construction of the spiritual power of the modern papacy. This is true not only because canonized sanctity constitutes a representation of behavioral models proposed to Catholic societies – hagiographical models are in fact models of Christian perfection in terms of behavior – but also and more fundamentally because sanctity involves the exercise of direct power by the Church over the faith and material lives of the faithful. The Church enacts this power through its thaumaturgical mediation via relics, by dispensing graces and healings, and by maintaining a monopoly over miracles (including their definition and verification). These latter were seminal factors in the lives of people in pre-industrial society the importance of which can only be fully grasped by recalling the watershed that was the advent of chemical medicine in the second half of the 1800s and the primacy of medical guilds in treating disease.

The year 1622 can thus be seen as the culmination of a long process of refashioning and consolidating the power of the Roman Church in its confrontation with the new confessional multiplicity that resulted from the Protestant Reformation. In this sense it also stands as a key turning point in the self-representation of Modern Catholicism. Teresa of Ávila, Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier and Philip Neri – and, if we want to add him to the list, Charles Borromeo – were the “modern” saints who inaugurated the new being of the global Church. Paradoxically, the 1622 ceremony was intended first and foremost to celebrate an “ancient” saint, the fifth of that year, Isidore the Farmer. It is not by chance, however, that he is almost entirely forgotten by historiography when we refer to the act of baptizing Counter-Reformation saints. Rather, what have remained central to historiographical memory are the holy founders of orders such as Ignatius and Teresa – although Stefan Samerski’s remarks in the following pages on the limited importance of this ecclesiological profile meaningfully offer a different interpretation of these figures in relation with their 1622 exaltation – along with a “popular” saint like Philip Neri and the apostle par excellence of the global projection of the missionary Church, Francis Xavier. This was a Church electing saints suited to representing and glorifying new dimensions of the religious realities that developed with the advent of the modern world. In the 1500s, the Roman Church became global: geographical discoveries went so tightly hand in hand with the project of evangelization that the Roman Curia even established a centralizing congregation – precisely in 1622 – for managing missions, Propaganda Fide (now the Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples). It was a time of Catholic revival in which Modern-era religious took action to care for the ill or the poor and educate young people, as illustrated by developments in the Jesuit and Oratorian orders, among others. This shift also involved the aristocratic-military arena, with Ignatius transforming his chivalric model of aristocratic behavior into a new understanding of masculine (religious) life: the Jesuits came to represent contemplatives in action, charged with working in the world without the constraints of “ancient” religious congregations. It also had a feminine dimension, devoted to mystical experience, excellently represented by Teresa of Ávila. Teresa became the mystic par excellence of the Modern Period, the bearer of a form of union with God that transcended the borders of earth and heavens in addition to being a woman of renovation, religious reform, and a founder, just like Philip and Ignatius together with Francis Xavier.

What we see in this portrait of the period is detachment from the earlier hagiographic tradition, expressed above all through the close relationship between the saints and their communities of origin. Viewed in this light, the 1622 canonizations can also be seen as the celebration of a sacred continuity thanks to which God’s action in the world was marked not by the “long” times of hagiographic traditions and enduring cults, but rather in the immediacy of the spiritual legacies and models

of behavior collected by those who preserved the memory of the founders. The history of sainthood in the Modern and Contemporary Periods confirms both visions, the long-term one of more or less legendary saints – of which Joan of Arc is an emblematic example – and that of saints remembered and reproduced through the transmission of written and oral hagiographies. The fact remains that this second model, so important today, had its origins precisely in the canonizations of 1622.