

Heroicity and sanctity in Catholic thought from early modern to contemporary age

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Abstract

In the Catholic Church’s regulation, the heroic practice of virtues is one of the main criteria for the canonisation of saints. This article explores the complex concept of heroicity as it is used both in normative-theological literature and in texts regulating the judicial practice of causes for canonisation. Particular attention is paid to the evolution of the idea between early modern formulations (with a focus on Prospero Lambertini’s seminal work) and its 20th-century re-elaboration, before and after the Second Vatican Council. Analysis integrates the historical perspective with a method based on semiotic theories. It looks into the meaning, values, and qualities associated to heroicity over the centuries, and points out changes in the aspectuality, semiotic axiology, ideas of gradualness, and personal maturation associated to this multifaceted concept. It thus highlights and contextualizes continuities and discontinuities within the Church’s teaching and judicial practice concerning the saints’ heroicity.

Key Words

Causes for canonisation, Heroicity, Heroic Virtues, Aspectuality, Narrative Program, Sanctity, Second Vatican Council, Lambertini.

1. Introduction

Canonized sanctity is one of the most characteristic features of Catholicism.¹ As Leone states, «saints are among the most formidable communication media of Catholicism.» Through saints, the Church proposes «models of spiritual perfection. By embracing such models, believers are able to conform to certain religious values» (Leone 2010: 1). Given the strategic importance of saints in expressing Catholic identity,² the Church has codified the procedure for officially recognising sanctity in an extremely detailed manner: «only the Roman Catholic Church has a formal, continuous, and highly rationalised process for “making” saints» (Woodward 1990: 18).

The canonisation procedure is based on three main criteria: martyrdom, the heroic practice of virtues, and miracles that occurred thanks to the saint’s intercession (Giovannucci 2018). This paper focuses on the second criterion: it provides an overview of the Catholic notion of “heroicity”³ as it was shaped in a corpus of normative, doctrinal, and theological texts from the early modernity to the 20th century.

Despite the fact that sanctity has been associated with heroicity since the first centuries,⁴ the earliest use of the linguistic expression *heroic virtues* in relation to causes for canonisation dates back to the early 1600s. The idea gained strength over the century to become a crucial element in causes for canonisation. Heroicity thus became an integral part of the “technical” judicial language adopted by the post-Tridentine Church in the procedures for examining and recognising sanctity; nevertheless, this judicial use of the term did not coincide with a definitive pinpointing of its meaning in doctrinal and theological discourse. Indeed, in the early modern and contemporary age heroicity appears as a complex and controversial concept.

In particular, it is possible to identify two pivotal periods in the early modern and contemporary formulation of this notion. The first coincides with the 18th-century work by Prospero Lambertini (later Pope Benedict XIV), who develops a systemic overview of previous dissertations about sanctity and regulates the meaning and the role of heroicity in the legal procedures for canonisation (Lambertini 2010). The second period coincides with the 20th-century

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2 Regarding the strategic and political dynamics involved in the “making of saints,” see Woodward (1990).

3 Specific literature uses both “heroicity,” e.g. Delooz (1969: 108-111), and “heroism”, e.g. Molinari and Gumpel (1979). We consider “heroism” as a more general concept and we use “heroicity” to indicate the particular notion of heroism conceptualized in Catholic culture.

4 See e.g. Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*.

formulation of the concept by Benedict XV, Pius XI, and Pius XII, and later by the Second Vatican Council. This re-formulation led to changes in the way heroicity is conceptualised, changes which were closely connected with the emergence of renewed models of sanctity and an updating of the procedure for evaluating the heroic practice of virtues in causes for canonisation.

Setting off from these premises, the aim of our analysis is not to offer a detailed historical reconstruction of the debate about heroicity⁵ but rather to focus on some of the main traits of this multifaceted concept in order to answer a set of questions that are semiotic in nature: what is the meaning attributed to heroicity in the Catholic discourse about sanctity? How and why specific values and qualities gain and lose importance in the discourse about heroicity over the centuries, and with what judicial and doctrinal consequences? Several authors have underlined the originality of the 20th-century re-formulation of heroicity; we build on this insight to retrace the evolution of the discourse about heroicity in order to identify points of continuity and discontinuity in the use of this social, religious, and cultural concept between the early modern and contemporary periods.

This paper is part of a wider research project adopting a semiotic method to inquire into the way models of sanctity have changed in 20th-century culture, especially after the Second Vatican Council,⁶ and to consider recent changes in a historical perspective with a focus on the early modern formulation of the concept of sanctity. In the general framework of this project, this paper aims to reconstruct the Church's official and normative discourse about the criterion of heroicity between the 18th-20th centuries. Our analysis therefore focuses on normative, doctrinal, and council sources which play a crucial role in both defining the Church's discourse about sainthood and pragmatically regulating canonisation procedures. In keeping with the project's goals, our method brings together two different perspectives: on the one hand, a semiotic prism which is attentive to the meanings, values, and narrative structures connected to heroicity as a key-word in Catholic culture; on the other hand, an historical angle attentive to the evolution of the concept of heroicity in a plurality of written sources. The analysis begins by focusing on the early modern concept of heroicity, with particular attention to the seminal treatise by Lambertini; it then examines how the concept evolved over the first half of the 20th century, was abandoned during the Second Vatican Council, and has been formulated more recently.⁷

5 Two seminal works in this field are Royo Mejía (1995) and Giovannucci (2013).

6 Nemosancti.eu, see footnote 1.

7 For the early modern period, we focus especially on Lambertini due to his fundamental role in systematically reviewing previous sources and in regulating the notion of sainthood. For the 20th century, we focus especially on pontifical documents as they are highly representative of the Church's official position and contain multifaceted and significant discussions of the topic under investigation. We consider conciliar documents as well in that they also represent the official and institutional stand, and because the Second Vatican Council has been a watershed in the history of modern Catholicism.

2. Early modern heroicity: New perspectives on Prospero Lambertini's *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione and Beatorum Canonizatione*

The first part of this paper sheds light on the role played by 18th-century Enlightened Catholicism – viz. a religious, cultural movement striving for a more rational religiosity in opposition to the Baroque, “theatrical” attitude and mindset – in the legal construction of the judicial practices regulating canonisation causes and especially the concept of heroic virtues. This study is based in particular on theological and judicial texts, as the concept of heroic virtues is deeply rooted in Catholic theological discourse and has been used as a meaningful legal element for regulating access to sainthood in the age of the Enlightenment. Lambertini's legal treatise is of the utmost importance for establishing the validation of heroic virtues as an indispensable step of canonisation causes (with the exception of causes for martyrs, which follow slightly different rules).

Lambertini's work perfectly expresses the religious and cultural sensibilities that began to circulate in European Catholic milieus in the 18th century. In the Italian Peninsula, one thinker and priest was especially influential in fostering the principles of Enlightened Catholicism and especially the necessity of normalising cults and religious practices: Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672-1750).⁸ Lambertini's work was definitely influenced by Muratori's invitation to moderate religious practices and regulate forms of devotion, still conditioned by Baroque emotionality.

This specific context, which is of the utmost importance for understanding the value of heroic virtues in the legal aspects of causes for canonisation, has been explored by several scholars including Paola Vismara, Mario Rosa, Ulrich Lehner, and Christopher Johns. Works by Rosa and Johns provide insight into the influence of the principles of Enlightened Catholicism on Lambertini's work, and on the regulation of sainthood in the 18th century. In 1991, Rosa highlighted the convergence between the *regolata divozione* (regulated devotion) proposed by Muratori and the “regulated sanctity” advocated by Lambertini (Rosa 1991: 531-532). This is where the key point lies: introducing the category of heroic virtues in causes for canonisation was a powerful means for the early modern Church to respond to the necessity of regulating sanctity through exemplar models, and such models were defined precisely by the performance of heroic virtues, and strictly controlled and ratified by Rome, the centre of Catholicity. Beginning with the pontificate of Urban VIII, a process of centralisation had begun. Furthermore, as Giovannucci (2008: 81-93) rightly stresses, the early modern re-thinking of sanctity, with the introduction of the exemplar model of heroic virtues, must also be understood as a Catholic response to Protestant criticism.

A brief overview on the notion of Christian heroism may allow us to better understand Lambertini's contribution. Firstly, Christian “heroism” can be (and is here) understood through the concept of degrees of virtue, where *heroicity* is a qualitative definition of a value (i.e. virtue), and the adjective *heroic*

8 On Muratori, Vismara (2014).

refers to the highest level of value/virtue, one which transcends the qualities of a merely *iustus* (righteous) man (Rojo Mejía 1995: 532).⁹ If virtues operate as values to be pursued, heroicity defines the degree or “grade” of realisation necessary to reach the goal of sanctity.

Catholic theologians borrowed the idea of *heroism* from Greek culture and rejuvenated it in accordance with Christian values, especially humility, charity, and faith. Classic heroes were considered to be semi-divine creatures with exceptional qualities capable of extraordinary deeds; this idea partially resembles that of saints as intermediaries between the earthly world and the divine.¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa* with its extended discussion of the concepts of virtue and *heroicity* played an important role in the process of assimilating heroism into Christian thought, and was widely used by Lambertini as a major source. Aquinas’ argumentation relies on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, according to which ethical virtues (i.e. virtues of human behaviour) derive from habit; in this sense, practicing virtuous deeds by means of the exercise of will works to transform human potential into actuality. In Aquinas’ view, virtue is a constant *habitus* of the soul driving men to do good and avoid evil (Giovannucci 2008: 8).

In the 17th century, theologians grew more and more interested in the idea of heroicity due to its increasing use in judicial practices of canonisation. Defining heroic virtues through a strict framework of values, established by Rome, allowed the Church to exercise control over and validate the legal features required for canonisation at the expense of illicit and inappropriate forms of cult and questionable models of sanctity. Indeed, these latter were seen as the product of highly emotional and misplaced piety (e.g. the Baroque mystic) that was attacked by both Protestants and those Catholics who promoted a more sober mindset and strove for moderation in religious devotional practice.

The expression *heroic virtues* was used for the first time in the proceedings of a cause in a letter about Therese of Avila’s beatification, addressed by the theologians of Salamanca to the Congregation of the Rites in 1602.¹¹ It is not clear whether the term “heroic” was a simple synonymous for “excellent” or “extraordinary,” indicating the exceptional excellence of virtues practiced by Therese, or if it was consciously employed to grant novel meaning to the concept by re-interpreting the Aristotelic-Thomistic doctrine. In any event, the term reappeared in documents related to further causes in the 17th century and pro-

9 Various scholars have highlighted the terminological evolution of the vocabulary of sanctity. See, e.g. Vauchez (1988: chapter 2). For a definition of *value* into semiotic perspective see Greimas and Courtés (1979).

10 The similarities and differences between Christian and pagan heroes are the subject of a long-lasting debate. In the 18th century, Lambertini (2010: 599) tried to determine whether it is possible to find actual examples of heroism among pagans and infidels. Despite developments in the Catholic definition of heroism, the discussion about the comparability of Christian and non-Christian heroes continued up to the 20th century, see Goffi (1979).

11 Acta Sanctorum, Octobris, VII, 1, 15 October (Bruxelles, 1845), chapter LVI, n. 1061-1062, 350.

gressively took on significant value in judicial practice.¹² Despite this *de facto* importance in the praxis of the causes, Church law in matters of canonisation took a prudent approach in acknowledging the concept of heroicity. It is significant that Lambertini, in the 1730s, was still questioning whether it was licit to use the expression *heroic virtues* in relation to sanctity. This expression of doubt shows that such a concept was not yet legally established even though it was frequently used in judicial procedures (Lambertini 2010: 597).

In parallel with this judicial evolution, early modern theologians argued over the definition and meaning of *heroicity* in relation to sainthood, proposing divergent positions. For example, according to a well-known treatise by Fortunato Scacchi, the practice of heroicity does not consist in a permanent habit of the soul, as Aquinas had claimed, but rather in an *actus virtutis* (act of virtue); contingent good deeds are thus excellent signs of virtue and Christian perfection (Lambertini 2010: 706).¹³ Moreover, in the 17th century, theologians and jurists focused more and more on the ethical significance of heroicity (as taught by Aristotle). For example, José Saenz de Aguirre suggests that heroic virtues are not specifically religious in meaning but rather moral, as they are only related to human behaviour. Francesco Piccolomini likewise taught that Aristotelian virtues have a moral-only value, and thus cannot be used as parameters for identifying Christian sanctity. This recognition of the moral value did not entail a negation of its soteriological aim, but the borders between the immanent and transcendent components of heroicity remained blurry. It was only in the 18th century that Lambertini eventually fixed the meaning of heroicity, both by explaining and harmonising the different and potentially clashing features of this complex concept, and by regulating its role in procedures of canonisation.

In 1740, Lambertini was elected Pope under the name Benedict XIV and went on to become the most influential Pontiff of the Age of Enlightenment.¹⁴ Only few years earlier, he composed the seminal five-book treatise *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione* (1734-38) revolving around legal procedures for canonisation. The work is the product of Lambertini's twenty-year experience in the Congregation of the Rites as *Promotor Fidei*, the officer tasked with uncovering any reasons that would prevent an unworthy candidate from being canonised.

The treatise offers a *summa* of canonisation legal practices as well as a systematic overview of the previous theological literature about sanctity, relying on the *auctoritas* of Church Fathers and early modern theologians (e.g. Augustine, Aquinas, Scacchi, and Brancati of Lauria). The third book constitutes the first systematic dissertation on and regulation of the concept of *heroicity of virtues* and represents a watershed in both the praxis of causes for canonisation and the modelisation of *heroism* in Catholic thought. Lambertini's method consists in commenting on and combining existing definitions, aimed

¹² As Giovannucci (2008: 11) pointed out, *heroicity of virtues* was not even mentioned by Rocca Camerte's important work (Rocca Camerte 1601).

¹³ See also Scacchi (1639).

¹⁴ On Benedict XIV's works see Fattori (2011).

at clarifying this concept both conceptually and normatively (Lambertini 2010: 615). Lambertini also constantly refers to judicial cases; at times, legal practice paved the way for producing norms in the field of sainthood.¹⁵

Current of early 18th-century Catholic culture and especially the critical hagiographic work by the Bollandists can be seen in the background of this impressive treatise,¹⁶ a fact which indicates Lambertini's willingness to regulate both the judicial life of the Church and its socio-cultural expressions, especially in an arena as complex as the "production" of new saints. As a pope, Lambertini promoted a form of Enlightened Catholicism which involved rationalising cults and carrying out socio-religious reforms, welcoming the demands for renovation put forward by the above-mentioned Catholic milieus.¹⁷

An attempt had already been made to regulate sanctity in the 1500s-1600s, in an anti-Protestant vein and in order to discipline forms of devotion in Catholic societies.¹⁸ The Church first addressed the problem during the final stages of the Council of Trent (1545-63) through a decree concerning the veneration of images and relics, and more extensively through Urban VIII's inquisitorial decrees and bull (1625-42) that identified instances of abuse and prescribed amendments.¹⁹ In the 1700s, however, in a period characterised by the Enlightened rationalisation of procedures and cults, updated legal regulations for defining the features required for canonisation became necessary.

Lambertini played a crucial role in this process, and managed to secure for Rome central control over canonisation causes (a process started with Urban VIII, one century earlier), including the verification of heroicity as a mandatory element for moving forward with the canonisation procedure. Lambertini definitively codifies the meaning of *heroic virtues* by connecting it to a set of precise and provable features. Thus, heroicity was transformed from a linguistic expression that was used only occasionally and had yet to be systematically defined to a legally-approved theological-moral concept.

Lambertini's treatise must be contextualised in a period in which Rome held a suspicious view of the typical Baroque mystic models of sanctity, char-

¹⁵ In particular, frequent reference to secret consistories and auditors of Rota's reports is made throughout the treatise.

¹⁶ See Rosa (1966). The Society of the Bollandists is a Jesuit research institute founded in the early 17th century in Belgium; since its origins, it has studied hagiographical texts and the cults of saints. The Society published the monumental *Acta Sanctorum*, which collects up accounts of the saints' lives according to the liturgical calendar.

¹⁷ See Messbarger, Johns and Gavitt (2016). On Catholic Enlightenment, Johns (2015); Lehner (2016).

¹⁸ For a semiotic reflection on the codification of sanctity after the Council of Trent, see Leone (2010).

¹⁹ Urban VIII's move in this direction was motivated by widespread examples of abuse in the delicate matter of promoting new cults. Lambertini also refers to the Tridentine decree *de iustificatione*, establishing that men be granted the three theological virtues during the process of justification (Lambertini 2010: 624). For a discussion of early modern canonisation procedures see Ditchfield (1995); Gotor (2002); Dalla Torre (1991); and Papa (2001: 297-360, regarding Urbanian reform).

acterised by ecstasies, visions, and prophecies, and definitely preferred good deeds as rational elements for defining sanctity. Validating heroic virtues as proof of God's particular election also prevented cases of simulated sanctity (i.e. pretending to receive supernatural gifts or celestial prophecies), or even cases of righteous people whose practice of virtues did not reach the heroic level, from being confused with approved sanctity models. The detailed procedure for ascertaining heroicity thereby came to serve as a guarantee of control for testing sanctity.

In his massive work *The visual culture of Catholic Enlightenment*, Christopher Johns has demonstrated, through his exploration of 18th-century religious art and Catholic culture, that «enlightened Catholicism wanted to create a saintly society by putting into the foreground the good works of those selected to join the heavenly communion» (Johns 2015: 62). Good deeds were portrayed by artists as evident signs of holiness and became the basis for a socially useful form of sanctity at a time when enlightened rulers considered contemplation to be useless and instead endorsed social utility (and, thus, charity and apostolate). In examining Lambertini's consideration of miracles in the causes, it is clear that good deeds which express virtues in a practical form absolutely had to be prioritised; indeed, it was essential that heroic virtues be made to overshadow the importance of miracles in the trials of candidates for sainthood (Johns 2015: 65).

By adopting a narratological terminology, we can affirm that *heroic virtues* are the values to be pursued by a candidate for sainthood in order to attain the goal of achieving Christian perfection, salvation, and possibly canonisation. Virtues are traditionally divided into theological (faith, hope, and charity) and cardinal, viz. moral (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance). Together they constitute a system of values necessary for achieving Christian perfection, and indeed Lambertini employs this traditional theological scheme to create a grid of features defining heroism. As habitual dispositions to do good, heroic virtues drive humans to Christ-mimesis; saints thus perfect their lives by following Christ's example (*imitatio Christi*).

In order to grasp the specific meaning of the Catholic heroicity of virtues within Catholicism and in Lambertini's work, it is necessary to first look into the dual (moral and religious) nature that characterises them and was the subject of debate among 17th century theologians. While Aguirre and Piccolomini confer a moral-only value on *heroicity*, Lambertini also reinforces the religious-teleological value of the concept. Indeed, he outlines a soteriological aim that goes beyond ethics and grants transcendent meaning to the enactment of such virtues through heroic acts. Nonetheless, the moral aspect seems to overcome the soteriological one, the one which constitutes the necessary precondition: Christian actions must always be directed, in fact, towards a supernatural goal, that is to say the goal of abandoning oneself to the Grace of God through which good deeds can be performed.

Christian heroism derives precisely from its teleological aspect, this aiming towards God. In Lambertini's argumentation, *natural lumen* only plays a central role in shaping Greek heroes, those who practice virtues guided by reason; Christian heroes are instead driven to practice virtues by God's Grace,

faith and soteriological anxiety. As a consequence, only Christian heroism deserves eternal life and divine compensation. Virtues without faith are like fragile leaves with no roots, missing the fruit of salvation.²⁰ The word *hero* itself bothers Lambertini in that it traditionally expresses the idea of glory, a condition which Christian saints humbly avoid.

Heroicity's intrinsic value thus depends on two elements: divine (rather than natural) inspiration and moral behaviour. Through free will, humans choose to follow God's invitation to sanctity by practicing virtues heroically. The value of free will in the performance of *heroic virtues*, and thus in the saint's path toward his or her goal, is particularly clear in Lambertini's discussion of faith, the first of the three theological virtues.²¹ Recalling Paul of Tarsus and Scacchi, he reminds the reader that faith must be combined with the performance of good deeds. This point represents an anti-Protestant reminder of the essentiality of free will, but also a sign of the focus on ethics and social utility that came to be fundamental in the age of Enlightened Catholicism. It is precisely these exterior deeds that serve as the origins of the *habit of faith*, necessary for canonisation (Lambertini 2010: 665, 669).²²

Lambertini provides not only a description of the virtues (or, in narratological terms, of the "values" to be pursued) but also know-how, viz. a description of the "competencies" to be acquired and a guide to accomplishing the appropriate actions. These prescriptions have two functions. Firstly, they lead the candidate for sanctity to achieving the values-virtues and positive final "sanction," that is, canonisation. Secondly, this precise definition also works as an effective guide for the assessment of sainthood candidates, ensuring that ecclesiastic authorities have at their disposal a detailed ideal model against which to assess contingent cases.

In order to be heroic, a virtue has to empower the person who possesses it to perform virtuous acts with promptness, facility, and joy, and in an almost automatic manner. The "owner" of the virtue must be driven by supernatural light, overcome his or her natural inclinations with total abnegation, and perform such acts freely (Lambertini 2010: 632, 779-781).²³ If these elements are present when performing deeds, they all constitute visible signs of the heroicity of the virtues involved. On the basis of Lambertini's re-formulation, the investigation of such evident signs has become a prominent step in canonisation and the term *heroicity* has been definitively assimilated into the Catholic normative system in referring to a Christian attitude expressing moral-religious values, practiced by means of exceptional deeds in soteriological perspective.

20 Lambertini (2010: 599) refers to Saint Ambrose.

21 As previously discussed, in this context free will refers to a free willingness that serves God; it is the inclination to do good, although the possibility of doing evil also remains. Lambertini argues that one of the grades of humility consists in renouncing one's will to freely follow the will of God (Lambertini 2010: 783).

22 Reference is made to deeds related to charity and the act of professing faith.

23 Lambertini refers to human will as a force driving men to wild passions, and by contrast the free will is framed as a gift granted by God through which men can act purely. Brancati of Lauria argues that Christian actions, in order to be proved heroic, must be inspired by God rather than simple human will.

²⁴Lambertini's normative text guided canonisation causes from legal and conceptual points of view until the Vatican Council II, and even beyond: John Paul II still confirmed the verification of heroic virtues as an indispensable step in 1983.

A useful interpretative key for exploring the concept of heroicity is that of reasoning in terms of its qualitative nature. Recalling the arguments of various theologians such as Brancati, Lambertini defines *heroism* as the highest grade of virtue, perfection, and excellence of life, one which potentially allows devotees to overcome nature and become an example of openness to divine grace. The quality of heroicity is thus determined by a complex set of parameters, each realisable to different degrees. Some of the main parameters defining the quality of heroicity are the axiological organisation of the virtues and the combination of the notion of "grade" with the specific circumstances of individual lives.

Regarding the axiological organisation of virtues, charity and humility are the values (and virtues) constituting the substratum of Lambertini's dissertation, constituting the necessary preconditions for all the other virtues to be practiced. There is a lexical clue indicating the seminal role played by charity, namely its connection to the term "perfection." This latter term is frequently adopted by Lambertini and derives from Paul's Letter to the Colossians (3, 14); in this case, charity is defined as the bond of perfect harmony, and the first of the virtues.

Every virtue can be heroically exercised to different degrees that progressively reduce the distance between man and God. Lambertini provides detailed scales for virtues, illustrating not only a potential ascension through the grades of Christian perfection, but also a scale of different levels of heroicity that devotees can reach depending on circumstances. Grades of virtue are particularly clear in the illustration of the theological virtue of charity, a discussion that follows in the footsteps of Aquinas's dissertation. The highest grade of performed charity coincides with a Christian hero's objective, that is, perfection and resemblance to God (Lambertini 2010: 696).

The rigidity of Lambertini's grading grid is mitigated by its integration with the parameter of individual statuses. In discussing the excellence of life in the introduction to his 21st chapter on heroic virtues, Lambertini lists the types of possible subjects who might aspire to canonisation: besides martyrs, he also mentions confessors, bishops, virgins, non-virgins, and widows. This array of models of saintly life necessarily entails that the evaluation of grades be adapted accordingly. For canonisation, states Lambertini, a *multiplicem vitae excellentiam* (multiple excellence of life) is required (Lambertini 2010: 591). The Church requires that all virtues be proven, but it is not necessary for a Servant of God to have practiced them at all times, or always heroically; it is, however, necessary for candidates to have performed the virtues they had a chance to practice according to their state of life in a heroic manner.²⁵

²⁴ Giovannucci (2004) highlights in particular the moral value of *heroic virtues* in Lambertini's work.

²⁵ This is a recurrent idea in the treatise (e.g. Lambertini 2010: 630, 728). Lambertini (2010: 744) provides the example of a hermit, who cannot perform any

Despite the differences of grade that Lambertini recognizes in accordance with the different statuses he lists, heroicity is always associated with a fundamental quality, viz. exceptionality. As we will see, this point constitutes a major difference between this text and subsequent re-formulations of the concept of heroicity that instead evaluate the quality of “ordinariness.” Lambertini states, in fact, that the category of *heroicity* refers to the value of extraordinariness, and he pays scarce attention to the areas such as ordinary life and the “sanctity of the little things” that authors prioritised in the 20th-century re-evaluation of the couplings sanctity-daily life and extraordinariness-normality. In post-Tridentine causes for canonisation, including Lambertini’s guidelines, saints are presented as heroes acting in the field of exceptionality and practicing heroic virtues in extraordinary, sinless lives; the examples provided, such as Carlo Borromeo, perfectly represent this attitude and show furthermore that the durative aspect of the practice of virtues, lasting the entire life of the individual, is a central feature.²⁶ In early modern reflections, writers also assigned a great deal of importance to the fact that the candidate to sainthood’s heroicity should provoke admiration and wonder. As a result of this “amazing” quality, therefore, heroicity is inevitably tied to external manifestations consisting of individual and often “exceptional” actions. In this sense, Lambertini referred to heroic acts as the visible signs or indicators of heroicity.²⁷ This position constitutes an effective way of overcoming the ambiguity between act and habit found in previous theological literature about heroicity.

Visible signs constitute a parameter for judging heroicity in individual causes, which is why Lambertini proposes a typology of indexes of heroicity. For example, he discusses exterior signs of charity and love for God such as tears, hot flashes, and the practice of tearing one’s clothes, as in the case of saint Maria Maddalena de Pazzi (Lambertini 2010: 706).

In the context of the research project mentioned in the introduction that employs a semiotic methodology to explore normative texts about sainthood, narratology (and especially semiologist Algirdas Greimas’ work) has provided a complementary approach to be combined with classical historical and theological analysis in addressing the concept of heroic virtues.

In effect, “Lambertini’s saints” appear to be precisely designed characters which are defined through legal norms that create a narrative space in which Christian heroes act to achieve perfection. The desire for salvation and a striving towards God are key elements in defining Christian saints, and represent cornerstones of Christian heroism. From this perspective, semiotics and narration theories are valuable prisms through which to observe

heroic act of justice because he has withdrawn from society to live in isolation and prayer.

²⁶ Lambertini (2010: 607). Overall, the early modern Church’s strategies of sainthood favoured causes involving the triumphant heroes of the counter-Reformation and Catholic renovation, and later martyrs-heroes showing the image of a persecuted Church. See Hsia (2005) and Rai (forthcoming).

²⁷ In Peircean semiotics, an index “is a sign that interrelates with its semiotic object through some actual or physical or imagined causal connection” (Merrell 2001: 31).

and understand Lambertini's definition of heroicity and saints as Christian heroes.

According to Greimas' theory,²⁸ a "subject" is defined as an individual who has taken in hand a set of values, values which in the case of "saint-subjects" coincide with traditional Catholic heroic virtues. However, the perfect realisation of virtues that each of the subject's actions is aimed at constitutes an intermediary step necessary for reaching a final and supreme goal, namely Christian perfection and maximum proximity to God. Once the saint-subject makes the decision to adopt this specific set of values, he or she is projected into a narrative program that Lambertini defines in detail, a program shaped by the performance of deeds which are extraordinary but nonetheless driven by the indispensable aid of God's Grace.

In Greimas' actantial model, God appears as the addresser inviting humans (addressees) to sanctity (which also means that He instils in humans the desire to reach this goal) and offering the eternal reward at the end of the journey. Through the lens of ecclesiastical history, the Church herself could be considered the addresser, inviting Catholics to follow patterns of Christian perfection aimed at increasing one's resemblance to God through the example of saints. And indeed, the final sanction applied to the saint's performance is two-fold, entailing both heavenly rewards and the Church's positive judgment resulting in canonisation.

The Church also acts as a guarantor of the values that must be imitated by devotees by means of its norms and procedures. Along with models of sanctity disseminated through iconography and hagiographies, these norms, and especially Lambertini's work, provide specific guidelines for Christians wishing to model their lives after the saints' examples. In light of this point, exploring heroic virtues entails understanding both the competencies that candidates to sainthood require in order to be canonised and the set of values they present in the "narrative program" of their lives.

Lambertini's dissertation succeeded in bringing order to the conceptualisation and regulation of sanctity. However, the systematic and detailed nature of his work also carries with it a certain rigidity. The Christian hero that emerges from Lambertini's treatise is ultimately a static character.²⁹ This model does not tolerate any deviation from the virtuous path, the only exception being the cases of saints such as Ignatius of Loyola who started acting heroically after their internal conversion. In such cases, we understand Christian heroes as partially dynamic characters who modify their lifestyles (as is particularly clear from traditional hagiographies) but never go back after conversion. Lambertini draws this static conception of the saintly character from Aguirre's *Treatise on Virtues and Vice* and its teaching that heroic virtues can be practiced on different levels but, regardless of the degree of heroicity mastered, there can be no possibility of vice or omission: heroes never deviate from their pattern of perfection.

²⁸ See Greimas (1966; 1976).

²⁹ "It is necessary for the hero to always be the same, meaning that he did not divert from a path of virtue." Lambertini (2010: 622).

With Lambertini, the idea of Christian heroism was definitively re-formulated after centuries of attempts to bridge the cultural gap between classic philosophy and Christianity. Lambertini standardised the meaning of the concept of heroism and the associated theological and cardinal virtues, sanctioned the necessity of verifying the performance of heroicity as defined and prescribed in order to prove sanctity, and made it law. Over the centuries, the values associated with sanctity and the relevance of heroism changed, paving the way for the emergence of novel forms of sainthood which were finally ratified by the Vatican Council II.

In a chapter of his monograph on Catholic Enlightenment, Ulrich Lehner fascinatedly points out that, analysing the biographies of 17th-century canonised saints, there is no evidence of any real engagement with Enlightenment principles. These biographies do, however, show that the Baroque, mystic, and full-of-miracles models of sanctity were overshadowed by the value and performance of virtues. «In the realm of saintliness, it is the lived virtues, not miracles or supernatural marginalia such as bilocation or levitation, that qualify one as a saint» (Lehner 2016: 178).

This attention to virtues «made the saints role models for the idea of the Catholic Reform that God calls everyone to a state of holiness;» (Lehner 2016: 178) a universal call, without any discrimination on the basis of social status or gender, which pushes every person to exercise virtues and potentially live a holy life.

This insight offers a novel perspective for investigating how the category of heroicity was employed by the early modern Church. On the one hand, the idea of excelling in performing virtues to a heroic degree seems to frame sanctity as an exclusive achievement, a goal that is not within the reach of just anybody because the required grade of perfection is so extremely high. On the other hand, it also shifts the balance of the elements that are necessary for being a saint: not elitist mystic visions or celestial gifts of prophecies and miraculous healings, as in the past, but a constant practice of virtues to a heroic degree, in daily life and according to one's status.

From this perspective Lambertini's work, and especially his move to introduce the judicial verification of heroic virtues in a sainthood candidate's life, must be read as the prelude to a change in the Church's concept of sanctity, specifically the shift from a state of fabulous, miraculous extraordinariness to a condition that anybody might maintain in daily life through heroic moral behaviour.

This value-laden shift had a major consequence: defining models of sanctity based on the practice of virtues, as in Lambertini's treatise, was more convenient than proposing the Baroque model with its suggestion of a direct, spectacular engagement with God (besides the risk of being compared to heterodox models). In this sense, these models gradually transformed sanctity from a spectacular expression of God's election into a moral-religious issue while also contributing to effectively disciplining Catholics' moral behaviour through engagement with the example set by the saints.

3. Reinterpretation of heroicity in the 20th century

Lambertini's systematic definition of heroicity contributed to the definitive legitimation of the use of this term in the 1917 Code of Canon Law, the code which introduced the first explicit canonical formulation of the criterium of heroicity into causes for canonisation (c. 2104).³⁰

From the 1920s onward, however, the idea of heroicity underwent changes that, as we will see, were perceived as quite radical at the time. Such perceived innovations had to do in particular with emphasising the qualities of universality and "normality" and attenuating the qualities of extraordinariness and exceptionality. This re-formulation took place especially in the pontifical discourses popes delivered when proclaiming the heroicity of the virtues of canonisation candidates. In 1920, Benedict XV (Giacomo della Chiesa) claimed that heroicity does not reside in "unusual and amazing deeds" that do not depend on human will. On the contrary, as he repeated in several occasions, sanctity resides in "the little things" and only consists in adhering to divine will, as expressed in the continual and exact fulfilment of the duties associated with one's status (Benedict XV 1920).

This formulation was then developed in Pius XI's discourses (collected under the significant title *Invitations to heroism*, Pius XI 1941), which contain several ideas that were later further elaborated by the conciliar and post-conciliar Church. For instance, pope Achille Ratti stressed the universality of sanctity, an idea which became one of the central concepts of the conciliar dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* (1965). Indeed, Ratti stated that «the vocation to heroism affects each Christian» and that sanctity is not the privilege of a specific class but is for everybody (Pius XI 1941: 11-12, 126-127). There is no distinction based on age, social condition, or temperament that precludes access to sainthood: «We often look at the great of this world. But there is a higher, truer greatness we can tend to the ways of which are accessible to the small and the humble» (Pius XI 1941: 20).

Ratti positions the qualities of exceptionality and universality in a harmonious way through an idea of imitation that underlines both the importance of individual subjectivity and the inadequateness of merely copying existing models. Imitation should not consist in passively reproducing particular actions, actions which are actually unrepeatable because of both their excellent and contingent quality; rather, it should consist of finding in saints' feats a general inspiration to live as perfectly as possible, according to one's specific condition: «to imitate does not mean to copy or to conform oneself. It means to enter a certain sphere of inspiration, a certain exemplary light, where one starts to see and hear things in the same way as the subject that one contemplates and wants to follow» (Pius XI 1941: 27-28). Ratti therefore proposed an idea of imitation based not on copying a "narrative program" but on adopting a certain mode of life.

The emphasis on saints as imitable examples also entails the marginalization of miracles. Ratti affirmed that, in causes for canonisation, the discourse

³⁰ See Eszer (1992).

about heroicity is more «fruitful and suggestive» than the one about miracles (Pius XI 1941: 11-12) because the latter are rare manifestations of God's power rather than the result of personal ability. This teaching has consequences in the judicial praxis of causes: in recent times, the Church has canonised several saints that did not meet the canonical number of miracles.³¹

Moreover, Ratti noted with concern that there was a growing demand for modern models of sanctity in which «natural ethics prevails over the divine element» (Pius XI 1941: 19-20). His answer to this request consisted in defending the “classic” models, emphasising the traditional traits that best responded to emerging needs and translating them into a language that sounded appealing to his peers. For example, in Ratti's speeches delivered in the 1920s-1930s, the traditional theme of Christians' universal vocation to sanctity is expressed by denying the relevance of “social class” in determining sainthood. It is reasonable to connect this lexical reference to the diffusion of Marxist ideas.³²

Pius XII (Eugenio Pacelli) followed in his predecessor's footsteps. In a famous discourse about Frère Bénilde held in 1948, he presented the blessed as a model of imitable sanctity and of a heroicity practiced in humble things, without spectacular or extraordinary events. Heroicity, he argued, consists precisely in the coherent and persistent exercise of virtues day by day, in a life that is «simple and uniform, an uninterrupted sequence of ordinary actions in a quite modest context.» Bénilde's life resembles the humility of the violet: «Just as one treads on the violet in the grass where it is hidden, without recognizing it from its scent, one disdains the discrete scent of a life without a glow [...]» (Pius XII 1948).³³

This shift towards the model of humble heroicity can be read as part of the construction of a modern Catholic identity in contrast with totalitarian ideologies and the related spread of the ideal of the *übermensch* proposed by Nietzsche and developed by philosophers and writers between the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century.³⁴ According to Chappel,

31 E.g., John XXIII was canonized with one miracle instead of two, and the 120 Chinese martyrs canonized in 2000 were given a dispensation from the one miracle required in causes for martyrdom.

32 E.g. the Italian communist party was founded in 1921, four years after the Russian Revolution.

33 This reference to the violet in Pius XII's discourse, especially addressed to a French audience, can be interpreted as a reference to Thérèse of Lisieux's autobiography (1909), which presents the same metaphor. Thérèse is a prominent representative of the ideal of humble heroicity promoted throughout the 20th century. Cf Benedict XV (1921), Pius XI (1925) and John Paul II (1997).

34 In Italy, the *übermensch* ideal was developed by decadent artists such as Gabriele D'Annunzio and the intellectuals collaborating with the review periodicals *Il Convito* and *Il Marzocco*. See Salinari (1960). The ideal of the *übermensch* is radically opposed to the Catholic idea of religious life, which is based on the renounce to individual will and power. Vuarnet (1986: 43), for instance, in the framework of a reflection about the meaning of the vows, observes: “Ces trois thèmes (argent, sexe, volonté) définissent le bonheur et le plaisir humain comme étant liés à l'exercice d'un pouvoir. De ce pouvoir, le religieux se dépossède. Cette dépossession est en quelque sorte la condition de la possession par Dieu - (le pacte avec le diable, au contraire, implique une augmentation de la puissance, ou de la volonté de puissance - cf: Faust).”

it was during the 1930s that the Catholic Church transitioned from an antimodern to an antitotalitarian institution. Indeed, it was the experience of encountering both right- and left-wing forms of totalitarianisms (fascism and Stalinism) that induced the Church to become modern. The Church, Chappel claims, considered examples of totalitarianism to be a pathological form of modernity that threatened Christian values; however, rather than looking back at outmoded ideals, the Church reacted by endorsing an alternative, modern ideal based on innovative values such as dignity and human rights. As our analysis shows, the seeds of this shift toward modernity in terms of the specific topic of sainthood can be dated back to the 1920s, when the Church began to officially promote an ideal of ordinary heroicity in contrast with the heroic ideal of the Nietzschean *übermensch* taking root in Western culture at the time.

This trend was confirmed by the Second Vatican Council, the first ecumenical council to present an in-depth dogmatic formulation of sanctity.³⁵ It is significant that, in the framework of a council characterized by lively debates, the chapter on sanctity in *Lumen Gentium* «encountered no resistance» (O'Malley 2008: 174). According to O'Malley, this agreement indicates that this chapter represented a unanimous position about sanctity, but also that the conciliar fathers had not fully grasped the importance of its implications: *Lumen Gentium* said «explicitly, forcefully, and for the first time ever in a council that holiness is what the Church is all about, what human life is all about» (O'Malley 2008: 174-175), thus constituting a turning point in the Church's identity.

The conciliar fathers adopted and developed the idea of the sanctity “for everybody” fostered in the first half of the century and tried to provide a positive response to the growing need for “modern” models that Ratti had already noted back in the 1920s. However, despite these elements of continuity, the Council acts elide the concept of heroicity; indeed, they present only one occurrence of a word with the root “hero,” in the decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (1965, n. 17): «the sacred synod heartily thanks God for continuing also in our times to raise up lay persons of heroic fortitude in the midst of persecutions [...]» Heroicity is invoked this one time in the conciliar documents to underline two key features of the conciliar teachings. Firstly, heroicity is related to the work of the laity inside the Church. Following Ratti's invitation to practice sanctity in every status, the Council stressed the importance of models of lay sanctity and the value of social engagement (Rusconi 2005). Secondly, heroicity is related to martyrdom, an element which constitutes another linchpin of the post-conciliar Church.

Indeed, *Lumen Gentium*, the conciliar document that addresses the theme of sanctity most extensively, does not mention heroicity at all. According to many commentators, this avoidance of the term represented a conscious choice, as evidenced by the fact that preliminary schemes of the constitution mentioned heroicity (Molinari 1988); such a choice might have reflected the intention to avoid both excessively “technical language” (i.e. the judicial jar-

35 On the Second Vatican Council, see Alberigo (1995-1999).

gon of the canonisation procedures) and the confusion between Christian and non-Christian concepts of heroism in use since antiquity. Moreover, the elision is viewed as a coherent application of the teachings of Benedict XV, the pope who opened the possibility of canonisation without «the proof of clearly heroic acts» (Crisuolo, Ols and Sarno 2014: 33). Eszer (1992: 631), former rector general of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, discounts the significance of the elision by observing that no ecumenical council ever mentioned heroicity and that the Council did not deny the signified, only the signifier, a term which entailed undesirable mental associations with «excessively agonistic ideas» (Eszer 1992: 634). It is quite likely that the rhetoric of heroism was perceived as outdated and inadequate in the 1960s, when memory of its use in the propaganda of totalitarian regimes and nationalist movements was still fresh.

After the Council, a reform of the canonisation procedures was carried out through a corpus of normative and applicative texts presenting several occurrences of terms connected to “heroicity.” These documents³⁶ do not provide definitions, but rather use heroicity as a technical term related to causes for canonisation. The occurrences can be classified according to two main textual contexts: 1) the reference to the heroicity of virtues as one of the two canonical pathways to sainthood, together with martyrdom;³⁷ 2) the description of procedures for the ascertainment of heroicity.³⁸ Consequently, in post-conciliar regulation heroicity continues to operate for the most part as a “narrative program” following the parameters defined by Lambertini and legitimized by the 1917 Code.

Although heroicity passed silently under the Council’s radar and was used as an established technical term in subsequent normative documents, throughout the 20th century and up to the present day doctrinal and theological literature has continued to reflect on heroicity. These formulations tend to harmonize different – and in some cases almost dichotomous – values. As we have stated, for example, while traditional heroicity is associated with the value of exceptionality, the new concept, albeit not wholly denying this feature, couples exceptionality with its opposite, that is, an ordinary and everyday character.

Similarly, the contemporary notion of heroicity seeks to strike a balance between universality and individuality. While heroicity should be a universal goal, it can be reached through infinite individual paths and take on different physiognomies according to the particular circumstances of life. While this principle was already mentioned by Lambertini, the plurality of individual paths towards sanctity is particularly accentuated in the 20th century, as the

36 The corpus includes the documents mentioned in footnotes 36 and 37, and also *Sacra Rituum Congregatio* (1969) and *Normae servandae* (1983), which do not contain any occurrences. Researched queries: “eroi*”, “eroe”, and “hero*” in Latin and Italian. The documents are available at <https://w2.vatican.va> (accessed 10 November 2018).

37 1 occurrence in *Sanctitas Clarior* (1969), 1 in *Divinus Perfectionis Magister* (1983), 10 in *Sanctorum Mater* (2007).

38 2 occurrences in *Regimini Ecclesiae* (1967), 6 in *Sanctorum Mater* (2007).

proliferation of models of sanctity and the exceptionally high number of canonised saints clearly show. However, the move to acknowledge individuality does not leave room for individualism. Molinari and Gumpel claim that, in order to reach heroicity, today's individuals should overcome their ego, i.e. the «egoistic and egocentric inclinations» that deeply affect them (Molinari and Gumpel 1979: 480). This formulation translates into modern terms Lambertini's description of abnegation as one of the requisites for sanctity.

While heroicity is an abstract ideal the perfect realisation of which is relegated to a transcendent dimension, in contemporary formulations it also has a close and two-fold relationship with immanent reality. On one hand, heroicity is often presented as a “realistic” (i.e. feasible) possibility. For example, Molinari and Gumpel (1979: 488) claim that the Church has canonised «people who represent the most different forms of life and who mirror the inexhaustible range of human possibilities in a surprisingly rich way. However, [...] the officially canonised saints constitute only an infinitesimal part of those who are saints *de facto*. Christian heroism, therefore, is not just an ideal, but also a reality.» On the other hand, “realism” is also the most suitable attitude for faithful who would seek to achieve heroicity. Indeed, the quest for heroicity is a continual effort to avoid errors and imperfections, but it also entails accepting human limits: «This is precisely one of the most mature and essential expressions of Christian heroism: to be able to accept this fact with a healthy sense of realism that does not abandon itself to discouragement, self-harm, and self-commiseration, but knows only the will to correct itself» (Molinari and Gumpel 1979: 482).

This relationship with reality also assumes another specific meaning in relation to the “social” value of sanctity, a value which is related to several historical factors including the Church's formulation of the Social Doctrine, the spread of “left Catholicism,”³⁹ the Council's promotion of the Church's missionary goal, and the development of Liberation Theology. Indeed, it is common for 20th-century Catholic literature to advocate for a social and political form of sanctity. For instance, Sobrino (1983: 42), known for his contribution to Liberation Theology, claims that the notion of sanctity as separation from the profane should be corrected since sanctity presupposes a response to God's will in a specific historical moment: in the current world situation, sanctity should be political, i.e. a practical action «aiming at the structural transformation of society in the direction of God's Kingdom.» Similarly, D'Alfonso (1976: 491-495) claims that «asocial saints are inconceivable today.» Sanctity has a «social salvific function» that saints fulfil in «temporal society.»

This social character of heroism, an idea which has its roots in the Enlightened Catholic principle of social utility even in sanctity, brings the Catholic model closer to a secular modern ideal that Goffi describes as follows: «A hero is defined as someone who engages his person and existence in socio-political actions, who tries to convert unjust public structures, to foster an experience of autonomous freedom among peoples [...]. The hero is embodied in the liberator of a community» (Goffi 1979: 490).

39 See Horn and Gerard (2001).

The contemporary idea of heroicity presents, moreover, an erosion of the notion of acting in that this notion becomes so elastic as to indicate a lasting way of life rather than single and specific actions. This concept is therefore interested by a considerable shift in aspectuality, which consists in valorising the duration over punctuality. Criscuolo, Ols, and Sarno, authors of the manual used in the *Studium* of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, claim:

Even though Benedict XIV explicitly requests a consistent number of heroic acts for the prosecution of our Causes, he advances the possibility of doing without heroic acts in the strictest sense, by keeping only what [...] qualifies the act as heroic, that is, its arduous character. In other words, heroicity does not necessarily manifest itself anymore through precisely circumscribed acts; it also manifests through an attitude, habitual behaviour. In this perspective, we reach the point of exonerating [candidates] from properly heroic acts and recognizing a kind of habitual heroicity, which consists in unaltered constancy in the practice of virtue; a constancy that is itself very arduous. (Criscuolo, Ols and Sarno 2014: 30-31)

The idea of heroicity as a *habitus* can already be seen in Aquinas, while early modern theologians such as Scacchi underlined the importance of individual acts. Lambertini in turn stressed the importance of individual acts, but added nuance to this concept by explaining that their importance lays in their being the visible signs on the basis of which *habitus*, or the long-standing practice of virtues, can be proven. He also highlighted the importance of the multiplicity of single acts. In contrast, 20th-century authors proposed a notion of heroicity as a long-lasting state that can disregard single acts. Consequently, heroicity is increasingly sought not in punctual actions composing a “narrative program” à la Lambertini, but rather in a “mode” or “form of life,” expressions that frequently recur in contemporary Catholic literature.

The shift from individual act to duration has at least two important consequences, both for the way sanctity is conceived and narrated and for the judicial praxis of canonisation. Firstly, the introduction of the idea of the hero’s “maturation” represents an important innovation. While heroicity in Lambertini’s view was a substantially static condition, the sole prerogative of a fully “mature” personality,⁴⁰ Eszer (1992: 635) denies the rigid, immutable, and schematic nature of the exercise of heroic virtues while Molinari and Gumpel stress that heroicity «in common and daily life is the fruit of a gradual ripening process» in keeping with «the general laws of life, which does not grow abruptly, but according the whole dynamics of an organic and harmonious development» (Molinari and Gumpel 1979: 482-483).

The second consequence concerns the praxis of causes. Both Gabriel of S. Mary Magdalen and Bonhome postulated a direct relationship between the emergence of the new concept of heroicity and Pius XI’s choice to institute the historical section of the Congregation of Rites. Indeed, from Ratti’s pontificate onwards, the evaluation of heroicity began to entail an «historical consideration of the life [...] in its whole development,» whereas the old judgment re-

40 See Gabriel of S. Mary Magdalen (1949: 184) and de Bonhome (1969: 343).

quired «the demonstration of the particular heroic virtues, immediately based on specific acts duly attested» (Gabriel of Saint Mary Magdalen 1949: 177). This renewed approach brings together an unprecedented variety of methodological approaches (from critical-historical method to psychology) to consider «the life of the candidate in its most concrete reality,» thus moving beyond Lambertini's rigid «preestablished catalogue of virtues» and accounting for numerous variables such as personal conditions, temperament, social milieu, and spiritual gifts (Molinari and Gumpel 1979: 483-485).

4. Conclusions

A sense of unprecedented novelty in the conceptualisation of heroicity emerges from 20th-century literature:⁴¹ since the 1930s,⁴² the teachings of della Chiesa, Ratti, and Pacelli have been universally received as crucial complements to Lambertini's treatise. While all the above-mentioned Catholic authors agree with the concepts expressed by the popes (i.e. the signified or content of the term heroicity), they express different positions regarding the signifier (the term itself). Some authors consider the use of the term heroicity to be positive or acceptable when associated with the “new” 20th-century formulation.⁴³ Others manifest perplexity about the persistence of its use, mainly because it is partially extraneous to Catholic tradition and shrouded in semantic ambiguity, a fact which explains why the term was avoided in conciliar documents.

Our analysis shows that this perceived 20th-century novelty clashes with the fact that numerous features presented as innovative are actually already found in the early modern sources. This apparent contradiction can be explained by considering that the word “heroicity” is associated with a complex system of qualities and values that changes across time. The main changes, however, affect not the single elements in themselves but rather their axiological organisation: some qualities – such as the aspect of lasting over time, and ordinariness – assume greater importance, while others – such as the exceptional and miraculous elements – become marginal.

The success of some features over others depends on their functionality in promoting models of sanctity which meet the needs of a certain period while being comprehensible and appealing both inside the Church and in broader culture. A good example of such variation in the internal axiology of heroicity can be seen in the history of the quality of universality of sanctity. This idea had already been nourished in the late 16th century by Francis of Sales who, in *An introduction to Devout Life*, promoted the universal call to sanctity and Christian perfection in daily routine, according to one's state of life. This model of sanctity, based on the value of “normality” in contrast to the “extraordinariness” of heroic life, was disregarded in a period when the Church

41 Cf. de Bonhome (1969: 342).

42 The earliest clear expression of this perception of renewal we found trace of dates 1937, cf. Gabriel of Saint Mary Magdalen (1949: 178), who refers to a speech by the general postulator and Passionist Egide des Sacrés Coeurs.

43 See e.g. de Bonhome (1969: 343) and Machejek (1990).

focused on heroes by evoking the image of a triumphant counter-Reformation Church. However, the notion of status-based duty was developed by Aguirre and Esparza in the 17th century and stressed by Lambertini in the 18th century. In the first half of the 20th century, Ratti adapted the idea of the universality of the call to heroicity to his contemporary audience by translating it into terms of “social class” equality. Finally, the universality of the vocation to sanctity was systematically fostered in the 1960s through *Lumen Gentium*. Thus, four centuries after Francis of Sales, the sanctity of “normality” came back into the spotlight because it seems particularly apt at embodying a Catholic ideal of life in an increasingly secularised society.

In turn, the notion of heroicity itself has occupied a different axiological position in Catholic culture over time. Thus, while heroicity became a progressively central feature in the early modern definition of sainthood, it has become more marginal in the 20th and 21st centuries mainly because of its association with moving beyond a form of religiosity still imbued with miraculous manifestations and the heroic rhetoric of political movements. As a consequence, since the second half of the 20th century, heroicity has mainly survived as a technical term in the praxis and the documents of canonisation causes.

The criterium of heroicity in causes for saints has persisted over time due to its functionality, as can be seen in juridical and theological systematisations such as Lambertini’s that have contributed to defining precise sanctity schemes. Such patterns resulted in grids of features essential to the rush to sainthood, as they contributed to stereotyping models of sanctity to be imitated by Catholics. Modelisation was indispensable to the Church, not only in order to discipline devotees’ everyday lives but also because causes for canonisation were (and still are) judicial procedures in need of specific, juridically-approved rules.

In light of these points, we see the obvious risk involved in reducing multi-faceted figures to stereotyped characters. As we have shown, Lambertini set out a precise narrative program that a Christian hero must fulfil. However, while it is true that Lambertini illustrated the hero’s competencies very specifically, the grid of virtues that emerges from the treatise is actually quite elastic, as the Church takes into consideration the particular conditions and states of life of sainthood candidates (Lambertini 2010: 744-745). For this reason, although we can identify specific and highly stereotyped models of sanctity that vary in part depending on the different periods and messages that the Church wished to promote (e.g. counter-Reformation saints, mystics, martyrs, 19th-century child-prophets), virtues are not considered absolutes. On the contrary, saints are heroes when they give proof of their virtues by performing deeds related to their state of life (i.e. the virtues practiced by secular women cannot be the same as those mastered by monks) and to different degrees.

The axiological reorganisation of the notion of heroicity entails changes in the way it is evaluated in the framework of causes for canonisation. At least since Lambertini, heroicity of virtues has distinguished itself from the concept of simple excellence of life by virtue of its duration over time, but in causes for canonisation heroic acts were still considered indispensable visible signs for

ascertaining heroicity. In the 20th century, however, the evaluation became more comprehensive and organic, so much so that some authors argue that heroicity can be practiced – and verified – in the overall story of a life, even in the absence of single, visible heroic acts.

After the early modern formulation and 20th-century shift that we have tried to describe herein, the notion of heroicity still plays a role in the 21st-century doctrine about and regulation of sanctity. This is demonstrated, for example, by the 2017 motu proprio *Maiorem hac dilectionem*, in which Pope Francis acknowledges “offering one’s life” as a specific way to become a saint, explicitly mentioning heroicity, and by the 2018 apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exultate* n. 5 and 7), «on the call to holiness in today’s world,» in which the pontiff mentions heroic virtues as «signs of an exemplary imitation of Christ» and once more stresses the topicality of the ideal of everyday or “next-door” heroicity:

I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God’s people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in elderly religious people who never lose their smile. In their daily perseverance I see the holiness of the Church militant. Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbours [...]. We might call them “the middle class of holiness.

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