

## CHAPTER VII.

## CONCERNING CERTAIN HAGIOGRAPHIC HERESIES.

Direct relation established between the history of a saint and his legend—Exaggerated confidence in hagiographers—Ill-considered appeals to local tradition—Confusion between a probable and a truthful narrative—Excessive importance attributed to the topographical element—Legend held in utter contempt.

TO draw up a catalogue of the principal errors committed by hagiographers and critics ever since the world has studied the lives of the saints would be indeed an onerous task. There is no form of literature into which people rush so frequently without any sort of preparation, and if it be true that goodwill is sufficient to give pleasure to the saints, it is less true that nothing more is needed in order to praise them worthily, or to appreciate at its true value the quality of the praise bestowed upon them. Hagiographers, alas, have sinned greatly, and the only consolation left us is to believe that much will be forgiven them.

But if it be futile to hope that we may draw them all back into the straight paths of historical criticism, let us try at least to warn them against certain gross errors which have become accredited among them, and which day by day render the misunderstandings between history and poetry more serious, and the conflict between science and piety more acute. These erroneous beliefs usually circulate in a nebulous condition. In

the light of the principles which we have attempted to lay down, it should suffice in most cases to reduce them to precise terms in order to expose their falsity forthwith.

The first and most widely spread error consists in not separating the saint from his legend. A narrative will be accepted because it refers to a well-authenticated saint, while the very existence of another saint will be held in doubt because the stories concerning him are improbable or even ridiculous. It is one and the same principle which may, according to the school that acts upon it, lead to either of these equally absurd conclusions.

It will not take us long to demonstrate its falseness. The various divisions of our own work go to show that the saints run a continual risk of being compromised by the literature written in their honour, for the very reason that the people on the one hand and the hagiographers on the other are much in earnest in singing their praises. Moreover the documents concerning them are exposed to all the perils of transmission. Thus there is no sort of immediate proportion between the legitimacy and popularity of the cultus of a saint and the historical value of the written documents which attest its existence. One martyr whose cultus has never spread beyond the narrow walls of his basilica, may live for us in authentic Acts of an incomparable beauty. Another, whose tomb attracts pilgrims from the whole world, is only known to us from narratives whose interest is far inferior to that of the Arabian Nights but whose historical value stands on much the same level.

Dare I say that the value of the Acts of the saints is in inverse ratio to the celebrity of their cultus? As

a general proposition this perhaps would not be quite accurate. But it cannot be denied that legend having been most active round the most popular saints, historical tradition has been more difficult to preserve in much-frequented sanctuaries than elsewhere. And this is true of all great pilgrimage centres. Except in certain quite special cases, we know nothing either of their origin or their patrons save the most fabulous reports.

We are therefore fully justified in looking with suspicion upon the legend, while retaining full confidence in the saint.

I will not go so far as to maintain that one should admit the existence of a saint whatever his legend may be. It will be remembered that we have come across more than one hagiographic narrative having reference to an imaginary personage, and yet bearing all the appearance of an authentic document. Some other evidence is therefore needed in order to establish the real existence of the object of the cultus. If it is a fact that, in the course of centuries, every other trace of his career has become obliterated then we may reasonably entertain doubts on the subject. When we affirm that a particular saint has never existed we simply assert the fact that he is only known to us by a legend of insufficient authority to prove his existence.

A second very common error is to place an exaggerated confidence in the biographers of the saints. People seem to transfer to these pious writers something of the respect due to the saints themselves, and the oft-repeated phrase, "We read in the Lives of the Saints," without any one taking the trouble to specify the biographer referred to, shows clearly that people implicitly attribute the highest qualities of the historian to every member of the fraternity.

If one insists upon knowing upon what grounds so much faith is placed in the author of the life of a saint, one is probably told that by his piety, his reputation or the dignity of his office he was one of the remarkable men of his day. People forget to add whether there is any reason for believing him to have been well-informed, and capable of making the most of the sources he had at his command. And while the known writers are accepted thus uncritically, the anonymous ones—and the great majority of legends bear no name by which to authenticate them—are allowed to benefit by the reputation for science and integrity which has been conferred on the whole corporation of hagiographers, a reputation, as we have seen, wholly unmerited.

Need we dwell, at this juncture, on the injustice done to the saints themselves, by quoting, as their authentic utterances, the words some obscure scribe has placed on their lips after having evolved them laboriously from his own mediocre intelligence?

I shall be told that these remarks can only apply to readers wholly destitute of critical sense or of literary pretensions. Not at all. What is true is that in more scientific circles the same monstrous error is found under another name: it is the confusion between authenticity and veracity. The first step is to prove that the Acts are authentic, that, for instance, St. Eucherius is incontestably the author of the Passion of the Martyrs of Agaunum, the second is to make use of the Passion as though it were a document of the first value, and with it to encumber the history of the later persecutions; and so on.

We shall not be wandering from our subject if we call attention to the further illusion of those who pro-

fess a sort of blind admiration for that highly respectable collection known as the *Acta Sanctorum* and who have developed the unfortunate habit of quoting it as though it were the Gospel. How frequently have we not read concerning some strange miracle or some suspicious revelation for which the writer was anxious to gain credence, this naïve remark, "This fact is admitted by the Bollandists".

The uninstructed reader would of course assume that after having submitted the incident to a minute examination, these "pitiless critics"—this is the consecrated phraseology—have allowed themselves to be disarmed, and that, in the face of the evidence, they have been unable to deny the correctness of the narrative, or to contest the supernatural character of the event.

Need we point out that it would be paying too much honour to any group of men, however learned, who merely apply methods that are known to and at the command of every one, to attribute to them a decisive authority in questions of infinite delicacy and not easily susceptible of hard and fast rulings? Neither Bollandus, nor Papebroch, nor any of their successors have ever entertained any such pretensions. As a general rule they have abstained from attempting to solve insoluble problems, holding it to be a sufficient task to classify the hagiographic texts, to print them with scrupulous care, to make known with all attainable exactitude, their origin, their sources, their style, and if possible to pronounce upon the talent, the morality and the literary probity of their authors.

Should therefore some honest writer experience the desire of conciliating his public by making it known that he has not neglected to turn over "the vast collection"—the epithet is once more *de rigueur*—of the *Acta*

*Sanctorum*, I must beg him at least not to make the editors responsible for all that it contains. Let him content himself with a formula that can compromise no one, such as: "The account of this incident has been published by the Bollandists". But to infer from this that the Bollandists guarantee its authenticity is to draw an unwarrantable conclusion. "If the Bollandists," writes one of their number, "believed definitely in all the miracles and all the revelations they publish, there could not be men of more robust credulity."<sup>1</sup>

We now come to a third error which consists in setting the tradition of the church in which a saint is specially honoured in opposition to the solid conclusions of scientific research.

Among those who make use of this argument are some who, without knowing it, confuse apostolic tradition, the rule of faith for all Christians, with the popular tradition of their particular church. Such persons should be sent back to their theology in order to learn not to use the word "tradition" in an unqualified sense save in dogmatic matters.

But without going to this extreme, a considerable number think themselves justified in contesting the results of criticism by pleading respect for local traditions. Unfortunately what it is usual to dignify with the title of the tradition of a particular church, is merely the current version of the legend of the patron saint, and the form of respect claimed on its behalf is to consider it straightway as a tradition of historical value: an inadmissible pretension if it is hoped by these means to evade the necessity of weighing the evidence. In order to do that it is essential to go back to the begin-

<sup>1</sup> Ch. de Smedt, *Des devoirs des écrivains Catholiques*, Brussels, 1886, p. 16. [This last sentence is deleted in the 3d ed.]

ning. If the history of the saint, as officially accepted, belongs to one of the three first categories of hagiographic texts enumerated in an earlier chapter, it may be conceded that at least in its main outline local tradition is an historical tradition; if not, then it is no use quoting it at all. Historical tradition is that which goes back to the event itself; popular tradition often arises several centuries later, and sometimes even unceremoniously dislodges the most solidly established historical tradition.

History informs us that St. Procopius of Cæsarea belonged to the priesthood. Legend, as accepted throughout the East, transformed him at a later date into an officer, and soon he was universally known under the title of *Procopius dux*.

Current tradition describes Pope Xystus as dying on the cross, and every one is familiar with the verses on St. Laurence by Prudentius:—

Fore hoc sacerdos dixerat  
Jam Xystus adfixus cruci.<sup>1</sup>

Yet we know for a fact from a letter by St. Cyprian, who was not only a contemporary, but a well-informed contemporary, that Xystus died by the sword.<sup>2</sup>

Concerning St. Agnes there were current, as early as the fourth century, the most contradictory reports, every one of which would probably be disproved by history, if unhappily history had not been wholly silent where she is concerned.<sup>3</sup>

The traditions of the various churches in France which claim apostolic descent only date from the

<sup>1</sup> "Twas this his bishop had foretold, Xystus when fastened to the cross." *Peristeph.*, ii., 21-22. [Instead of "current tradition" ("la tradition courante") the 3d ed. reads "Prudence fait mourir": "Prudentius has Pope Xystus . . ." *Ed.*]

<sup>2</sup> *Epist.* lxxx., Hartel, vol. iii., p. 840.

<sup>3</sup> Pio Franchi de' Cavalieri, *S. Agnese nella tradizione e nella leggenda*, p. 26.

period at which these legends, on which their pretensions are based, first won acceptance. This period is, in most cases, quite easy to ascertain, and it is simply arguing in a vicious circle to seek to authorise the legend by the tradition of which it was itself the source.

And yet the argument is pressed: "Are you unaware," these writers say to us, "of what took place in the churches in the fifth and sixth centuries when, in response to the eagerness of the faithful to listen to the acts of the martyrs in religious assemblies, the ancient and venerable narratives of an earlier period were collected from all parts, and recorded in a more methodical and oratorical style? The new editors, writing under the very eyes of the bishops, would certainly have abstained from introducing into their narrative any important circumstances up to that time unknown to the people."<sup>1</sup>

This manner of looking at the problem fails to correspond in any way with the actual facts.

It is assumed, what has to be proved in every individual case, that the Passions of a debased age were, in fact, derived directly from "ancient and venerable narratives of an earlier century," whereas we know how rarely the hypothesis can be verified.

Further, it is assumed that the Acts of the Martyrs were very generally read aloud at the liturgical Offices. We know that in the very great majority of churches such was not the case, and consequently that we can count neither on the vigilance of the bishops nor on the sensitive ears of the faithful for the maintenance of historical traditions concerning the martyrs.

<sup>1</sup> [Dom Guéranger,] *Les actes des martyrs depuis l'origine de l'église chrétienne jusqu'à nos temps*, vol. i., Paris, 1856, p. xxxiv.

Hence episcopal control over local hagiography and the devotion of the people to a received version of the history of a saint constitute facts that require demonstration and can in no sense be accepted as an hypothesis to be taken for granted.

In point of fact wherever we are in the position to trace the diverse phases of the genesis of a legend, we are able to demonstrate in the clearest possible way the lack of this double conservative influence. The case of St. Procopius which we have studied in detail is sufficiently conclusive on this point. Could it be said that the priests and the faithful of the diocese of Lyons kept jealous guard over the memory of the curé d'Ars if they in any way countenanced a biographer who represented him as being, not at home in his presbytery, but at the head of an army?

The hagiographic legends of antiquity belong incontestably to popular literature. Not only do they bear no official hall-mark, but what we have been able to ascertain concerning their origin and their development affords us no guarantee of their historical value. The faithful found in them a means of edification and they required nothing further. Even in our own day, how many people are quite satisfied with those deplorable compilations known as the *Petits Bollandistes* or the *Grande Vie des Saints* in which history holds but an inferior place, but of which the narratives serve as food for piety!

A fourth error consists in accepting a hagiographic narrative as historical merely because it contains no improbabilities.

I may say at once that mediæval hagiographers intent on impressing their readers with what was marvellous and extraordinary, have so encumbered

their passionaries with fabulous tales, that the absence of any extravagant element of itself creates a favourable impression. If people went no further than that we should have nothing to complain of.

But we must first examine in what form the document has come down to us. Many Passions of martyrs have been transmitted to us in texts of varying lengths, some developed, others obviously abridged or even cut down to a short lesson. Now the abridged texts frequently make a more favourable impression than the originals, the developments which betray the methods of the compiler having largely disappeared. One may compare, for example, the short Passion of St. Theodotus with the longer version that has also been preserved.<sup>1</sup> On the evidence of the abbreviated version alone, one might perhaps pronounce a very different judgment on the hagiographer and his work. It would be easy to apply a similar test to many other abridged narratives of which the original is still in existence.

Unhappily the confusion between what is true and what is probable may frequently be recognised even in the methods of that higher criticism by means of which students have professed to disentangle the historical narrative concealed from our view beneath a confused mass of legendary lore. Supposing it to be true that all the improbabilities of a narrative are interpolations: it will then suffice to exclude this extraneous element in order to bring the document back to its primitive condition.

The process may appear somewhat naïve; nevertheless it has been put into operation by men who were

<sup>1</sup> Both have been published by M. Pio Franchi de' Cavalieri, *I martirii di S. Teodoto e di S. Ariadne* in *Studi e testi*, vol. vi., pp. 85-87, 61-84.

far from simple themselves. I will only quote, as an interesting example, the case of a scholar like Lami who by making a judicious selection from the fabulous legend of St. Minias, succeeded in compiling a reasonable history, but one that was as little veracious as its predecessor.<sup>1</sup>

If it is rare for historians ostensibly to indulge in practices of this kind, they frequently apply the method in all unconsciousness. Thus they are guilty of doing so whenever they make use of suspicious documents on the specious plea that they contain "good parts". Le Blant was guilty of the practice on a large scale when he was hunting up "supplements to Ruinart". If these "good parts" are anything except portions of the original historical record which the compiler had before him, they are of no possible use—as any one can see—for rehabilitating the document.

A fifth error consists in classifying a document as historical merely because the topographical element can be certified as correct.

This blunder has been committed hundreds of times, and it must be admitted that in many instances the argument to be drawn from topographical precision is, at first sight, beguiling. How often does it not occur that this is the one point capable of verification, and if the document is found to ring true in this respect what more natural than to assume the excellence of the whole?

And yet we may go very far astray by relying too

<sup>1</sup> *Sanctæ ecclesiæ Florentinæ monumenta*, vol. i., Florence, 1758. This is how he expresses himself: "Eius actis insinceris et apocryphis fides adhiberi ab homine cordato non potest; tentare nunc juvat an ea defæcare, et fabellis, quibus scatent, purgare et ad verosimilem historiam redigere, mihi res ecclesiæ Florentinæ illustrare adgresso fortunate liceat". (p. 589).

much on topographical tests! It would be easy to quote many wholly psychological novels, the wanderings of whose heroes through Paris could be traced without difficulty. When the world has forgotten that Bourget wrote novels, we should be compelled, according to this theory, to accept his stories as real history, and the problem as to whether or no *David Copperfield* is compiled from autobiographical memoirs would be solved by the fact that all the hero's journeys can be verified on the map. All that scientific criticism may assume from a narrative topographically correct, is that the author had familiarised himself with the places in which his personages reside, which in most cases simply means that he wrote at Rome, Alexandria or Constantinople, according to the special knowledge he may display, and that he had seen the tomb or the basilica which he describes.

Bearing this in mind it is easy to appraise the value of certain archæological discoveries which have seemed to justify what had hitherto been regarded as somewhat dubious acts of martyrs. It has become possible to prove that these Acts have been written—a fact that is in no way surprising—in the vicinity of the sanctuaries whose origins they were supposed to relate. But the authority of the narrative gains nothing thereby, and after, as before, the "confirmation" supplied by the monuments, we are free to assert that the whole legend had its birth in the imagination of a poet.

There was much excitement some years ago over a discovery which was held to have rehabilitated the Acts of SS. John and Paul. This is how M. Le Blant<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Les persecuteurs et les martyrs*, p. iii.. See also P. Allard, *La maison des martyrs*, Paris, 1895. Taken from the *Correspondant*, 39 pages.

describes the circumstances: "Little reliance was placed on a text which was thought to be founded in part on original documents but to have been corrupted by the introduction of some wholly inadmissible details. Nevertheless the tradition of the martyrdom inflicted on the two saints in their own house continued to survive. Indeed the precise spot where they were executed was shown, and in the sixteenth century a marble slab was let into the pavement towards the centre of the church, bearing these words, *Locus martyrii SS. Ioannis et Pauli in ædibus propriis*. One of the Passionist fathers attached to this church, the Rev. Dom Germano, whose intelligent initiative cannot be too highly praised, was anxious to ascertain whether the conformation of the ground was in accordance with the belief to which the inscription testified. He set about excavations and explored the soil beneath the church, and almost at once he made the discovery, beneath the high altar, of two rooms of a house, which from the materials out of which they were constructed as well as from their interior decoration, undoubtedly belonged to the beginning of the fourth if not to the end of the third century. Hence it is clear, as the *Passio* relates, that the church was built on the site of an ancient house."

It is useless to continue the quotation, for we have arrived at the one definite result of these excavations. They have in no way solved the problem as to whether the hagiographic text was founded on original documents in spite of its containing some "inadmissible details". Since then proof has been forthcoming that the story of SS. John and Paul does not depend on any historical source, but is merely an adaptation of the

history of SS. Juventinus and Maximinus,<sup>1</sup> and in spite of all the interest that surrounds the "house of the martyrs" none of the difficulties of the legend have been solved by it. Indeed the only solution to which no serious objection can be taken is that the patrons of the title of Pammachius are the holy apostles John and Paul transformed by legend at an early date into officers of Julian's court, after the pattern of other similar transformations with which we are by this time familiar.

We have now pointed out to the reader various vicious methods in order to put him on his guard against over-confidence in hagiographic legends. We have been exclusively occupied with the historical point of view, and it must be admitted that only too often the history of the saints has been obscured by legend. But it would be a fresh error to assume from this that the legends of the saints—I refer here to legends in general—are unworthy of attention. A comparison will at once make my meaning clear.

Let us suppose that an artist and an archæologist are both standing before a religious picture, some great work by an Italian or Flemish master.

The artist would rave enthusiastically of the beauty of the conception, the skill in the composition, the intensity of the expression, the depth of the religious feeling.

If the archæologist were one in whom the æsthetic sense is lacking, he would give vent, before the masterpiece, to a series of criticisms, possibly accurate in themselves, but which would have the effect of exasperating

<sup>1</sup> P. Franchi de' Cavalieri, *Nuove note agiografiche in Studi e testi*, vol. ix., Rome, 1902, pp. 55-65. See also *Analecta Bollandiana*, vol. xxii., p. 488. [The sentence following — "Indeed . . . familiar." — was deleted in the 3d ed. *Ed.*]

his artist friend. Here we have a fantastic landscape absolutely at variance with what we know of the physical features of the country; there a style of architecture unheard of in that region, while the costumes belong neither to the period nor to the people. His feelings would be outraged to see St. Lawrence wearing a dalmatic when before the tribunal, and he might possibly ridicule that charming scene in which St. Peter preaches from a pulpit in a Roman piazza while St. Mark sits at his feet and takes down the sermon, dipping his pen in an inkstand respectfully held for him by a kneeling disciple.

This is the sort of criticism which our archæologist might pass upon Fra Angelico, Van Eyck or Perugino. No doubt he would study with curiosity the robes worn by the holy women at the tomb, the weapons of the soldiers escorting our Lord to Calvary, and the buildings by the roadside, because he would recognise in them contemporary documents of the time of the painter, and he would perhaps grow indignant with the art connoisseur, indifferent to these antiquarian details, and wholly absorbed in that which constitutes the true value of the work, the expression of the ideal.

Which of the two is the more just appraiser of this legend in line and colour, the enthusiast who seeks to penetrate into the inspired soul of the artist, or the unfortunate being who experiences precisely the same emotions before a great work of art as before a case of antiquities in a museum?

I would not be so bold as to transfer this comparison in all its rigour to the two camps that have grouped themselves round the hagiographic literature of the Middle Ages, that of the simple readers and sincere

admirers, and that of the despisers of these legends. It must be admitted that the pious chroniclers of the lives of the saints have not, as a general rule, been as happy as the painters, and that they have produced few master-pieces, few works even which, taken alone and judged on their own merits, would have attracted any notice or held public attention.

[And yet, who can deny that in spite of all the ignorance of technique and the clumsiness of execution, there is exhaled, not indeed from each individual legend, but from out the store-house of mediæval lore, something of that mysterious and sublime poetry which pervades the walls of our ancient cathedrals? Who will dispute the fact that these legends give expression with unparalleled vigour to the beauty of Christian faith and the ideal of sanctity?

Let us not forget that there is frequently a notable difference between what our worthy hagiographers wished to say and what, in point of fact, they have succeeded in saying. Their amplifications are often cold, the attitudes of their personages awkward and formal, their situations forced. But the thought which inspires them is noble and elevating, and their eyes are fixed on that perfect beauty of which pagan antiquity was wholly ignorant, the beauty of the soul filled by the grace of God, while their very helplessness in reproducing it in all its glory only aids us to esteem it the more.]

For a long time the Golden Legend, which is so accurately representative of the hagiographic labours of the Middle Ages, was treated with supreme disdain, and scholars showed no mercy towards the worthy James de Voragine. "The man who wrote the



Legend," declared Louis Vivès, "had a mouth of iron and a heart of lead."

It would in fact be hard to speak of it too severely if it were conceded that popular works are to be judged according to the standards of historical criticism. But people are beginning to realise that this is an injudicious method, and those who have penetrated into the spirit of the Golden Legend are very far from referring to it in scornful terms.<sup>1</sup>

I confess that, when reading it, it is somewhat difficult at times to refrain from a smile. But it is a sympathetic and tolerant smile and in no way disturbs the religious emotion excited by the picture of the virtues and heroic actions of the saints.

In this picture God's friends are represented for us as what is greatest on earth; they are human creatures lifted up above matter and above the miseries of our little world. Kings and princes honour and consult them, mingling with the people in order to kiss their relics and implore their protection. They live, even here on earth, in God's intimacy, and God bestows upon them, with His consolations, something also of His power; but they only make use of it for the good of mankind, and it is to them that men have recourse in order to be delivered from sufferings both of body and soul. The saints practise all the virtues in a superhuman degree; gentleness, mercy, the forgiveness of injuries, mortification, renunciation, and they render these virtues lovable, and they urge Christians to practise them. Their life is, in truth, the concrete realisation of the spirit of the Gospel, and from the very fact that it brings home to us this sublime ideal, legend, like all poetry,

<sup>1</sup> *Analecta Bollandiana*, vol. xxiii., p. 325.

can claim a higher degree of truth than history itself.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Count John Potocki Joseph de Maistre quotes, with comments of his own, an example of what he calls "Christian mythology". We cannot do better in order to elucidate our own thought than cite this eloquent passage: "Listen and I will give you one of these examples. It is taken from some ascetical work the title of which I forget. A saint, whose name I have also forgotten, had a vision in which he saw Satan standing before the throne of God. And listening, he heard the evil one say: 'Why hast Thou damned me, I who only offended against Thee once, whereas Thou hast saved thousands of men who have offended against Thee many times?' And God replied, 'Hast thou asked for pardon even once?' Such is Christian mythology! It is dramatic truth which preserves its value and its effect quite independently of literal truth, and would indeed gain nothing by it. What does it matter whether the saint in question did or did not hear the sublime words I have quoted? The great point is to know that *forgiveness is only refused to him who has not begged for it.*" See Count Joseph de Maistre, *Lettres et Opuscules inédits*, vol. i., Paris, 1851, pp. 235-36.

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# THE LEGENDS OF THE SAINTS

AN INTRODUCTION TO HAGIOGRAPHY

FROM THE FRENCH OF  
PÈRE H. DELEHAYE, S.J.  
BOLLANDIST

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
RICHARD J. SCHOECK



TRANSLATED BY  
V. M. CRAWFORD

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