

THE SAINTS COME MARCHING BACK
BEFORE THEY GO MARCHING IN:
THE **HERO** IS JOY FOR SOME SEASONS IN THIS WORLD,
THE **SAINT** IS JOY FOR ALL SEASONS IN BOTH WORLDS

Even if I spot on the "XL" (extra large) rack just the fabric I'd like, my situation is hopeless unless I can find that fabric, or one I like as much, on the "R" (regular) rack. In the invisible realm, the domain of soul-spirit & God, I face no such limitation. Through all the days & years of my inner life I have worn "XL" garments, the raiment of my heroes & saints. They have never demeaned me for being only "regular" in body, & less than that in energy. They have not seduced me into narcissistic, megalomaniac dreaming. And they haven't laughed when my imagination has clothed itself in their "XL"s, for they know that through loving I shall become what I long for....The clothing Loree & I sent our grandchildren for Christmas turned out to be, all of it, too large. "No matter," said the parents; "they'll soon grow into them."

The OCCASION of this Thinksheet is the current collocation of two books on my ten-minutes-per-day-each reading shelf. The 1650 one is by a Protestant saint, **Richard Baxter** (THE SAINTS' EVERLASTING REST, Revell-Epworth/62); the 1990 one is by a Catholic journalist-scholar, **Kenneth L. Woodward** (MAKING SAINTS: HOW THE CATHOLIC CHURCH DETERMINES WHO BECOMES A SAINT, WHO DOESN'T, AND WHY, S&S).

1 I know in the bones of my lifestory the difference between a hero & a saint. When I was nine, a hero laughed at my request & held me up to write my name on the cowl of "The Spirit of St. Louis." Lindberg, 1927. The next year, a saint with her fingers literally read my lips. Helen Keller. Ecstasy is the best word for both experiences. But what different ecstasy! A conqueror of outer space, so like my fictional hero Buck Rogers whose comicstrip began that year (& I pasted each of them, beginning with the first & continuing for several years, in a huge scrapbook). And a conqueror of inner space, incomparably more heroic ("God is the light beyond my failing to see, the voice beyond my failing to hear")! For me, Charles was a blip of joy for a season in this world; Helen is a timeless radiance of joy transcending the world while mastering it. My country is a unique mix of Charles (innovative, triumphalist technology) & Helen (resilient spirituality). Charles married Anne, a poet. That was good. In my metaphor, better he should have married Helen, the saint. But--again in my metaphor--its not too late for this blessed union to benefit America & the world.

2 In tough times of soul & society, the saints come marching back. Prophetism is revived in ancient Israel-Judah when, as in the time of Jeremiah, the very existence of the people is at stake. In days of confusion & anxiety, a sophisticated magazine is not ashamed to blazon on its cover "Who is GOD"? (LIFE, Dec/90; p.47: "He is always a God who looks upon His creatures with a steady comprehension, who has no trouble contemplating the face of us"; &, says the editor at large [p.78], "He will not tolerate the easy emotion or the shabby thought," allusive & elusive though He be to us)....In puberty, that biological tough time for everybody, my heroes were scientists & saints in a circle 'round Jesus, always the Center. Martyrs, courageous missionaries, researchers-inventors who directly alleviated human misery. A father defender of truth & fighter for fairness, judge worker of justice. A mother whose will to unity was stronger than all hostilities & disruptions. No-nonsense teachers in church & community. Preachers long on heart though not on mind. What indeed have I that I have not received from saints & heroes sung & unsung? Most of my saints have already marched in, but in me they keep marching back.

There's a hunger, now, for heroes, but even more for saints. Woodward's book should sell well because of this even more than because of its high quality. We have had more than enough of hoked-up celebrities, self-trumped-up Trumps, entertainment-and-sports idols, compromised politicians. Kipling put it well in "Recessional" (1897): "The tumult and the shouting dies; / The Captains and the Kings depart: / Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice, / An humble and a contrite heart."

3 But the saints do go marching in: Christianity is an otherworldly, as well as a thisworldly, religion. The preChristian pagan burial society was one of the sociomodels shaping the early Christian community. Beyond death, the saints abide in a world whose light shines through them before death; & there they participate in the heavenly banquet, the messianic feast, the marriage supper of the Lamb.

In our home there's a big eating room & a little eating room, each with a representation of Jesus at dinner. In the big room is the first of more than two hundred Gerald Hardy paintings of the last supper. Radically cubistic-impressionist, it suggests Jesus looking through you as you look through him into the next world. In the little room is a tinted etching of Rembrandt's "Christ at Emmaus." Everything is ordinary except Jesus' radiance, representing the disciples' moment of recognition. ("Discipleship is at the heart of Rembrandt's religious art," says Jn. McManners of this painting as he closes the "Introduction" to a masterwork he edited, THE OXFORD ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY, OUP/90. "The moment of recognition is at the heart of Rembrandt's piety....The writer of this preface hopes for that moment of recogniton" [pp.17f].)

4 Before we ate our New Year's Eve dinner in the big room Monday, I read to family & guests a passage (pp.40f) in Baxter's REST, as full of relentless a fortioris as Wm. Law's A SERIOUS CALL less than two centuries later: if this is true, how much more.... (Sam. Johnson, for one, found himself swept along by Baxter's logic suffused with passion for God in this world & the next.) Said I, "We are about to enter a new year & let the old year die. For each of us the time will come to say goodbye to this world & hello to the next, so New Year's Eve is a good time for a funeral sermon, which is what the book I'm about to read from started as, the author at the time being more dead than alive after four years as a military chaplain under Cromwell & the contracting of a wasting disease that caused the loss of most of his blood. He didn't die, nor did his book: it's a spiritual classic, a sustained & sustaining vision of heaven." I'll paraphrase: This Rest [heaven] brings life to fruition in God, our chiefest good. But do not expect too much of me as I speak of it! If John, to whom so much was revealed, could say it did not appear to him what shall be, "no wonder I know so little. When I know so little of God, I cannot know much what it is to enjoy him. When it is so little I know of my own soul, how little must I know of the infinite Majesty, or the state of this soul when it is advanced to that enjoyment!....While I cannot contain the smallest rivulet, it is little I can contain of this immense ocean. We shall never be capable of clearly knowing till we are capable of fully enjoying; nay nor till we do actually enjoy him. What strange conceivings hath a man, born blind, of the sun and its light; or of a man born deaf of the nature of sounds and music! so do we yet lack that sense by which God must be clearly known" & enjoyed. "I stand and look upon a heap of ants, and see them all with one view....They know not me,...though I am their fellow creature; how little then must we know of the great Creator, though he with one view continually beholds us all. Yet a knowledge we have, though imperfect, and such as must be done away. A glimpse the saints behold....As all good whatsoever is comprised in God and all in the creatures are but drops of this ocean, so all the glory of the blessed is comprised in their enjoyment of God; and if there be any mediate joys there, they are but drops from this....If the Lord lift up the light of his countenance on us there, it puts more gladness in our hearts than the world's increase can do. How much more when in his light we shall have light without darkness, and he shall make us full of joy with his countenance."

Said an antiChristian to me, "Your Christian view of the afterlife is merely a continuing of your selfishness in this life." Taylor's answer would be that the essence of UNselfishness is a love centering in the other, & the joy in God before & after one's death is more feedback from than motive for loving & praising God. The deepest tragedy of missing heaven is missing out on the opportunity to love & praise God beyond death. That, as the saints know, is the loss of any soul worth keeping. The primary meaning of "heavenly reward" should be rewarding God for life, & for love.

5 As PUBLISHERS WEEKLY said apropos of Woodward's book, "saints matter." Maybe they will soon matter more again. Maybe "Richard Baxter" will come to be more remembered than "Saddam Hussein."