

EDITORIAL

A PARAGON

FOR TODAY'S PRIESTS

At a period when one of the time-tested institutions of the Church, the priesthood, is supposed to be in "crisis", Rome always the good mother extending a helping hand to a faltering son has come up with another of its wise and timely acts with the canonization of St. John of Avila.

To the casual observer, this event could easily be viewed as just another of those occasional events in christendom where a man of tested virtues is inscribed in the golden book of the saints. The elevation of John of Avila to the sainthood however, has more than what meets the eye especially in this era of religious unrest and skepticism. The pain of so many defections from the ranks of her clergy and the wave of doubt and uncertainty among not a few of those who remain has led the Church to an earnest search for a model whom her priests could imitate as teacher of spiritual life and a renewer of christian morals and vitality.

John of Avila's relevance as a priest today cannot be genuinely appreciated without a comparison of the events that are currently sweeping our own time with those in which the saint lived and worked. To be sure, the two periods differ in many ways, but a certain resemblance can be gleaned. The awakening of vital energies and the unfortunate crisis in ideas very characteristic of the 16th century is also a dominant feature of our century. Post-conciliar reforms and discussions symbolic of our time was the climate where John found himself as a young priest.

John of Avila was poor and modest both in wealth and in health. Having surrendered his possessions early during his priestly ministry, he voluntarily led a frugal life which accounted much for his poor health even at an early age. Yet the privations he underwent bodily paled in comparison to the hardships he experienced with his spirit. Having been under suspicion of heresy as was customary for the *avant-garde* then, he was compelled to waste the precious moments of his youthful priestly life in prison. The bitterest test of his vocation however came when his cherished

desire of becoming a missionary to the then recently-discovered "Indies" was turned down. Amidst these reverses, John of Avila did not doubt. He knew his vocation and had faith in his priestly election.

John of Avila indeed may be honored as a many-sided example for us priests today. It is said that at present the priesthood is undergoing a "crisis of identity". Its nature and mission, it is asserted, does not have sufficient reason to justify its presence in the present age anymore. The ever increasing role of the laity in the apostolate, the demands for more secular involvement, the varied complexities of a deconsecrated world make today's priest feel rootless in his threshold and conscious of being somehow no longer a sign of the supernatural and the eternal.

But a priest to be worthy of this salt should be man enough in times like this to turn back to the rock from where he was hewn, and to be another John of Avila—unbowed amidst frustrations and steadfast amidst confusion.

Perhaps no other person except our incumbent pontiff, Paul VI himself a priest, can give us the true meaning of John of Avila's life and its message to fellow priests now. In his sermon the saint's canonization, he affirmed:

"John of Avila had profound awareness of something which some priests and many seminarians no longer understand as a duty and a specific title to the ministerial office in the Church. The definition of that something—we may also call it a sociological definition—derives from St. Paul's definition of himself as a servant of Jesus Christ and an apostle: "Set apart for the gospel of God" (Rom. 1, 1). This segregation, this specification, is that of a distinct organ which is indispensable for the good of an entire living body (cf. I Cor., 12, 16sq.). Today it is the first characteristic of the Catholic priesthood to be called into question and challenged. The motives for this are often noble and acceptable in some respects; but when they tend to do away with this "segregation" and assimilate the ecclesiastical state to the lay and secular state and justify the chosen man in experiencing worldly life under the pretext that he ought not to be less than any other man, such arguments can easily turn the elect away from his path, turn the priest into any man, salt without savour, a man unable to make interior sacrifice, one who has lost the power of judgment, of word and example such as pertains to a strong, a pure and a free follower of Christ. The Lord's incisive and demanding word: "No man, having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk. 9, 62) struck deeply into this singular priest. In the wholeness of his gift to Christ he found that his energies were increased a hundredfold.

Need we add more?