

The Gift

The following reflection springs from an event which took place during Christendom College's study abroad program entitled "Christendom in Rome."

The morning of May 31st was a cool one in Rome. It was the joyous feast of the Visitation. This was to be a particularly special day in Rome, for today John Paul II was to solemnly declare Claude de la Colombiere a saint of the Roman Catholic Church.

Claude was a brilliant 17th century Jesuit who had acted as a tutor to the children of Colbert who served, at the time, as Louis XIV's minister of finance. Despite his mental acumen and the fact that he was a magnificent homilist, Fr. Claude was sent by his Jesuit superiors to the tiny town of Paray-le-Monial on February 2, 1675. Many at the time thought this to be a waste of such a promising young Jesuit. Providence thought otherwise, for the wisdom of God is not the wisdom of men. A simple but extraordinarily holy nun lived in the Visitation Convent at Paray and Our Lord had promised to send to her one to be her director: a man of great judgment and sanctity whom He called "His perfect friend." Fr. Claude was to assist St. Margaret Mary in her divine mission of spreading devotion to the Heart of Jesus. This he did with great zeal and fidelity for the rest of his life at Paray and also during his sojourn in England as preacher to the Duchess of York. Falsely accused during the anti-Catholic Titus Oates madness which swept through England, Fr. Claude was arrested, imprisoned and there awaited execution. An intervention by the French government saved his life and led to his eventual release and subsequent banishment from England. His health was now broken due to the harshness of his imprisonment. He returned again to Paray where he met an early death on February 15, 1682.

Being in St. Peter's Square at any time is a moving experience. At 6:30 in the morning on this glorious Sunday, it was particularly so. Standing near the statue of St. Peter erected by Pius IX, one has a magnificent view of the facade of the basilica and the square. There is a certain pseudosimplicity found even in the Church which is based upon a false sense of humility. This causes some to look with disdain on the grandeur of St. Peter's: "What would St. Peter think of all this wealth and ostentation?" I believe that this basilica, the greatest in all of Christendom, whose breathtaking dome is situated directly over the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles, would have pleased the humble fisherman from Galilee. I believe, like a simple fisherman from Naples or Peru or Ireland, he would like it a great deal. The problem with this pseudosimplicity is that it is simply not simple enough to be genuine. The image of Christ triumphantly holding His cross with His hand raised in benediction for the entering pilgrim, surrounded by the Baptist and the eleven apostles (Peter is inside), would give joy to the heart of a humble fisherman from anywhere and to the "fisher of men" from Galilee. For what is celebrated here with riotous festivity and artistic delight is the triumph of Christ over death and the victory of the Church which He loves. If ever there was a cause for triumphalism it is here, for Christ's victory and that of His Church is a victory for all humanity.

At 7:00 a.m., the sun broke through the morning clouds and appeared just above the cross which stands on top of the Egyptian obelisk in the center of the square. This obelisk once stood along the spina of Nero's circus. The placing of the cross on top of the obelisk proclaims the triumph of the Faith over a decadent paganism and the might of imperial Rome. It was an inspiration of true genius which led a severe Sixtus V to move the obelisk from the side of St. Peter's to the center of the square which was later to be enfolded in the embrace of another man of genius named Bernini. Truly "the lion from the tribe of Juda has conquered!" As the sun made its appearance by the cross one could not help but recall the remarkable vision of a young caesar whom God had chosen to build the first great basilica over the tomb of the one who was told to feed the lambs and sheep. Simultaneously, the bells of St. Peter's began to thunder great salvos throughout the city proclaiming Domenica . . . The Lord's Day. For fifteen minutes, the bells thundered gloriously.

After passing Julius' Swiss color guard who saluted crisply, the pilgrims entered the most august temple on earth. While waiting for the Vicar of Christ to make his appearance, they gazed from Veronica's veil into the right transept which was the site of the First Vatican Council. A canonization is an exercise of the infallibility of the Papal Magisterium and therefore, a reading from *Aeterni Partis* seems appropriate:

Therefore, faithfully adhering to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian faith, for the glory of God our Savior, the exaltation of the Catholic religion, and the salvation of Christian people, with the approval of the sacred council, We teach and define that it is a dogma divinely revealed: that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks ex cathedra, that is, when, in discharge of the

office of pastor and teacher of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, is, by the divine assistance promised to him in Blessed Peter, possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that His Church should be endowed in defining doctrine regarding faith and morals; and that, therefore, such definitions of the Roman pontiff are of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, irreformable. But if anyone — which may God avert! — presume to contradict this our definition, let him be anathema.

The basilica is suddenly filled with light and the applause in the rear of the vast nave informs the People of God that the Successor of Peter has entered his Church. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass begins not with “good morning” but with a solemn invocation of the Blessed Trinity in the ancient *lingua Ecclesiae* . . . “In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancte.”

The Vicar of Christ is totally recollected as he prepares for the canonization and the eucharistic sacrifice. After the penitential rite, the ancient rite of canonization begins. The litany of the saints is chanted and the last of the heavenly heroes to be invoked is fittingly “Sancta Magarita Maria Alacoque.” The solemn formula of canonization is brief. “To the honor of the Holy and Indivisible Trinity, to the exaltation of the Catholic Faith and the increase of the Christian life” — Blessed Claude de la Colombiere is declared a saint! After the signing of an “Amen” and “Alleluia” and a “Tibis laus, Domine” the Cardinal Prefect for the Congregation of the Cause of the Saints thanks the Pope and John Paul II responds “Discernimus.” The entire basilica erupts with joyful applause hailing Christ’s newly proclaimed Saint. For a few moments it is as if heaven itself, and its courts, descended as the Church Triumphant and the Church Militant seemed to joyously celebrate together in an almost tangible way. For a moment, time becomes confluent with eternity. “What you bind on earth is bound in heaven.”

The Gloria, Credo and Pater are all sung in Latin renewing again the heart and the Pentecostal miracle. As the Vicar of Christ brings Christ again to earth through the miracle of the Mass, he appears to be lost in a mystical contemplation. All persons are deeply moved as the faith of Peter once again fulfills the divine mandate and “strengthens the brethren.” As the celebration comes to an end the Vicar of Christ passed in front of the great statue of Veronica and a group of devout pilgrims received his apostolic benediction with awe and a new sense of how deep supernatural joy can be.

Emerging again into the dazzling sunlight of the square, it is time for the Regina Coeli. “O Queen of Heaven rejoice, Alleluia . . .!” As the tapestry of St. Claude floats gently in the breeze from the loggia of benediction the bells again thunderously proclaim the glory of God and His Bride. It is truly a great and glorious thing to be a Roman Catholic, to have been blessed with the Faith, to be in love with Jesus Christ and the *res Catholica* . . . the Catholic thing.

Rendiamo grazie a Dio.

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