WHEN THE SAINTS…

15TH of SEPTEMBER CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE

16TH of SEPTEMBER EDWARD BOUVERIE PUSEY

17TH of SEPTEMBER HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

19TH of SEPTEMBER THEODORE OF TARSUS

20TH of SEPTEMBER JOHN COLERIDGE PATTESON

CYPRIAN of CARTHAGE was born in about 200 to rich parents, who were able to give him the best education available, including training in rhetoric. He became a lawyer and advocate in Carthage, but didn’t convert to Christianity until the age of 35, previous to which, as his testimony proclaims, he had been leading the life typical of a rich young man of his time. At his conversion Cyprian determined to live a celibate life, and, as was the custom when a rich person converted, he liquidised a very large portion of his family estate and gave the proceeds to the poor.

He was made a deacon and presbyter in fairly rapid succession, and probably in 248 he was elected Bishop of Carthage, which placed him at the head of some 85 other dioceses in Latin North Africa. The majority of clergy on the electing body opposed his appointment, but it seems that, having gained himself a constituency of grateful poor among the laity, it was pressure from them that won the day. In fairness it should be said that Cyprian had risen extremely rapidly to a position of leadership of a church in one of the three major commercial centres in the entire Roman Empire. Unfortunately, as it transpired, the losing side never accepted their defeat with grace.

The Roman Empire in the 3rd century was highly unstable, and so it was that a discontented soldier named Decius was proclaimed emperor by his troops and overcame the army of the existing Emperor Phillip; marched into Rome and to be proclaimed emperor, only to be assassinated in turn several years later. Decius needed to stabilise things as best he could, instigating a programme of building, and issuing a decree that every citizen should make oblations to the Pagan gods as a matter of civic duty: this was not primarily intended as an instrument by which to persecute Christians, but that was its inevitable effect. Everybody had to be issued with a certificate to prove that they had fulfilled this obligation, and the decree went empire-wide, inconsequence of which it is recorded in other parts of North Africa that the entire church in some areas very nearly fell apart. At first there was no actual execution involved, but confiscation of goods, an extensive use of torture and imprisonment brought on many deaths, including that of Origen, one of the most distinguished of all the early church fathers in Alexandria.

A very early casualty of the decree in Rome was the Pope, and during this vitally important time, the church there was being managed by a council of presbyters, so that Cyprian, as bishop of his province, had no superior authority to back up his decisions. He chose to take refuge in the wilderness near Carthage, which he justified on the grounds that he needed to be available to give leadership, and that Jesus himself had occasionally evaded direct danger when it was clear to him that his ‘hour had not yet come.’ However expedient this move may have been, Cyprian’s physical absence in Carthage itself would have weakened his authority. On the other hand, this meant that many of his letters have come down to us detailing the desperate struggles that ensued.

The entire church fractured. Quite understandably many church members capitulated and complied with the decree, which involved cursing Christ. Others who could afford to do so bribed government officials to issue certificates falsely, which kept them from actual apostacy. Some took refuge, or held on in the hope that they wouldn’t be confronted, while others, either from motives of fear or from sheer conviction, stood firm and took the consequences.

The problem arose when those who had denied Christ wished to be received back into communion, and in varying states of conscience; some genuinely repentant, and others perhaps with a sense of entitlement to do so. What really muddied the waters was that some of these lapsed church members sought out the ‘confessors’ already suffering imprisonment and begged for their forgiveness, which posed a particularly knotty problem for Cyprian because such ‘confessors’ were not only held in the highest esteem in the church on earth, but were considered to occupy a position in the heavenly hierarchy very close to God himself. Moreover some of the clergy who had previously opposed his election as bishop chose to accept those who had received such ‘peace’ from the confessors straight back into communion without insisting on the least public process of repentance.

Superficially this may be viewed as a matter of simple church order and discipline. If a confessor/martyr, many of whom were lay members, could ‘trump’ the clergy in issuing free pardon and insist on readmitting serious sinners over the heads of ordained clergy there was likely to be anarchy, not to mention that, with feelings running as high as they were, it was vital that such decisions should be hammered out among the church as a whole, and there was little prospect of this happening while the persecution remained in force. There exist letters between Cyprian and several of the ‘confessors;’ including one named Lucianus, who had issued a general letter of forgiveness to all lapsed church members of whatever stripe, though judiciously inserting a clause that left any individual case to the bishop’s ultimate discretion, so that Cyprian was able to over-rule it, whilst affirming and acknowledging Lucianus’s special status within the church.

Cyprian insisted that each individual instance of sin, whether from direct apostacy or indirect through paying for a certificate, should be judged case by case, once the persecution had come to an end, and some consistent policy had been worked out with the church as a whole.

Meanwhile Cyprian received a letter from the council of clergy in Rome supporting his position, which, by the way, had included the provision that if a lapsed member were to be found at the point of death, forgiveness should not be withheld from them, and that if a presbyter couldn’t be found, even a deacon could be allowed to give the kiss of peace and pronounce forgiveness. This, of course, created even further problems of church order!!!

Just to make things worse, a respected Roman bishop called Novatian shifted his position even further to the right by insisting that the lapsed members, however sincerely they had repented and undergone penance, might never be accepted back into full church membership and could only hope for forgiveness from God after death because the church lacked the competence to pronounce forgiveness for such a serious sin. At the election of a new Pope whom he opposed, he caused a schism by having himself elected and, in effect, forming his own church. The ‘Novatianist’ heresy and schism was still around in Augustine’s time, toward the end of the fourth century, and was only extirpated with the ‘barbarian’ invasions that Augustine himself lived to see at the end of his life in 430.

By this time, however, most of the clergy in Carthage were in open rebellion against Cyprian, and at one time he had only three presbyters on whom he could rely. In time the persecution ceased and Cyprian was able to return to Carthage, where he met his flock, crowded into the garden of a villa owned by a wealthy church member.

Addressing the lapsed members in tears, Cyprian owned that he had been wounded with them, had fallen with them, and had suffered their remorse with them, but that wounds must be healed; that it would take time and be the occasional of very great pain in the healing, but that such healing was necessary and could not be passed over or ignored, and that people who spoke gentle consolations to serious sinners had not been helping the process of true recovery and strengthening them for the future.

In April 252 it was at last practicable to organise a meeting of all the bishops in Latin Africa, and the subject of the lapsed members was top of the agenda. Cyprian had no doubt that another and more terrible persecution yet was on the cards, and partly for this reason and partly purely from his pastoral heart, he allowed the council to mitigate his original position, so that, in time, all the lapsed members were taken back into communion, provided that had acknowledged their sin and undergone penance: for those who had not done so forgiveness was to be withheld, even at the point of death.

In some of his final letters Cyprian, in his wisdom, established the policy that with the church as a whole under serious threat of war, everybody – both weak and strong – needed to be fortified with the body and blood of Christ in order to give them the best chance of staying united and keeping faith.

Hardly had the Decian persecution finished than the Emperor Valerian instigated a new one, but this time the strategy was to go primarily for the leaders: you may remember that in Rome this resulted in the martyrdoms of Pope Sixtus and the very witty – cheeky – St Laurence.

This time Cyprian, as bishop, stepped up to the plate, and proclaimed his faith before the local governor: a written record of their conversation exists. At first Cyprian was kept in his villa under house arrest for a year from April 257, but when new orders came there was a final confrontation and immediately Cyprian was led out to be beheaded. The story goes that he removed his own clothes; blindfolded himself, knelt to pray and stretched his neck to receive the executioner’s sword.

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EDWARD BOUVERIE PUSEY was born in 1800, educated at Eton and Oxford; made a fellow of Oriel college in 1823. In 1825 he went to Germany and met some of the emerging biblical critics, and for the next 3 years studied Hebrew, Arabic and other Semitic languages in Oxford and Germany. He was ordained and created Canon of Christ Church, and Regius professor of Hebrew.

Also in 1828, and later in 1830 Pusey published, in two parts, his opinion that what had brought about the criticisms and rationalisations of the Bible in Germany was the result of a dead letter Protestantism quite devoid of spiritual vitality. The books were misunderstood, and attracted fierce opposition and Pusey withdrew them.

In 1833 Pusey formally affirmed his membership of the Oxford Movement by his contribution of tract 18 ‘thoughts on the benefits of the system of fasting enjoined in our church,’ the erudition of which changed the nature of the tracts from pamphlets to treatises: later he wrote another three – 67-9 on the view of scripture on baptism. Pusey’s reputation for learning and holiness lent weight and prestige to the Oxford Movement, and when, in 1841, John Henry Newman converted to Rome its leadership devolved to Pusey.

He lent his considerable support to the Library of the Fathers, to which he contributed the first volume in 1838, a translation of St Augustine’s ‘Confessions’ with a preface stressing the importance of patristic studies. For all this, however, it was Pusey’s preaching that attracted attention, occasionally reaching almost mystical heights; but in 1843 a sermon of his given at the University ‘Holy Eucharist a comfort for the penitent,’ resulted in its condemnation for teaching error headed up by the vice-chancellor and six doctors of divinity and Pusey was banned from the pulpit for two years. Pusey believed in the real presence, and when the sermon was published without retraction the subject gathered some attention. [The article in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church states that he was ‘suspended from the pulpit for two years!!!]

He moved to Leeds, where he set up and ran a successful slum parish at St Saviour’s.

Since the death of his wife, Pusey had adopted a more austere lifestyle. He supported the foundation of the first Anglican convent, and gave generously towards those of other monastic houses.

Pusey believed in and propagated the notions of Hell and purgatory, and although he struggled to dissuade many from moving over to Rome, he published 3 ‘Eirenicons’ which he sent to various Catholic bishops in his campaign to seek unification of the Anglican Church with Rome. What held things back were the cult of the BVM, indulgences and Roman supremacy, and the bull of papal infallibility put the lid soundly on his very conscientious efforts.

Pusey died in ascot priory in 1882.

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 HILDEGARD of BINGEN was born in 1098 and died a widely respected and venerated abbess in 1179. She has become something of ‘new age’ ikon, very largely due to her interest in what is now known as alternative medicine, and in the properties of certain precious and semiprecious stones.

An article of this length can’t possibly cover all Hildegard’s accomplishments and achievements, and, as ever, Wikipedia is superficially helpful. Sr Lynne Doucet conducts a series of 12 half-hour lectures available from ‘Now you know’ media, and if her book is half as good as these, it will be worth reading. A good selection of her art, or rather the art that her nuns helped realise – is available on WikiArt. As for her music, the best and most authentic performances can be found on CD by Ensemble Organum, on Harmonia mundi, which places Hildegard’s compositions where they belong, in a liturgical context alongside the rest of the sung service for St Ursula.

Hildegard was an absolute phenomenon, but between her death and 2012, when Pope Benedict proclaimed her a saint by ‘Equivalence,’ and a Doctor of the Church, four previous attempts to have her canonised by the usual route had failed.

There are two ways by which somebody becomes a saint: the one we all know is the formal, somewhat byzantine and politically influenced ‘official’ route; the other arrives by a process of what is called an ‘Immemorial cult,’ which is to say that everybody in someone’s locality knew them to be a saint, and venerated them as such over time. What Pope Benedict was saying in effect was; ‘Everyone who thought Hildegard was a saint was right.’

For many people Benedict’s icing of Hildegard’s cake by creating her ‘Doctor of the Church’ would be seen as compensation for previous unjustified neglect. Of 35 other such, only 3 more are women; Catherine of Siena and the Teresas of Avila and Lisieux. From the church’s point of view clearly something had to be done to increase the female constituency, but those who deem her a philosopher are contradicted, however courteously, by Peter Adamson, whose online ‘History of philosophy without any gaps’ [sponsored by King’s College London] who asserts that Hildegard had nothing original to say, however originally she said it! For those of us who value originality of expression – mysticism – in the church, however, nobody could possibly object.

For this article, it’s probably best to stick to an outline of Hildegard’s life, of which many who might know some aspects of her achievements, may not be fully aware.

Hildegard was a rather sickly child who suffered from seizures, and began to experience visions from the age of 3, and was quite surprised when her nurse informed her that indeed she’d never had one. She was the tenth child, and it’s entirely possible that her parents’ decision to entrust Hildegard to a religious order may have had something to do with tithing; on the other hand perhaps they felt that a girl like Hildegard would hardly be marriageable.

The practice of entrusting a child to a religious institution goes right back to the Old Testament, and it not only assured it of board and lodging through childhood, but secured the adult into a safe career as a member for life of a religious order. So it was that Hildegard was ‘handed over’ to a rather special anchoress named Jutta, who seems to have taken care of a number of such children in quality of something between abbess and housemother. At all events Jutta oversaw Hildegard’s education, which would probably have involved learning some needlework and a musical instrument, besides some Latin. It’s also entirely possible that she may have begun assisting at the sick bay, which would have whetted her interest in medicine and healing. Hildegard was conscious all her life of a lack of learning; Jutta herself lacked any formal education, but perhaps we should be grateful that nothing in her childhood inhibited Hildegard’s capacity for self-expression.

Less edifying for Hildegard were the many and varied ascetic practices that Jutta inflicted on herself; wearing a spiked chain; flagellation, sleeping on the floor etc, none of which suited either Hildegard’s poor physical health or her temperament. Later in life, once she could be in charge of her own community, Hildegard allowed her women to express their femininity in ways that attracted criticism from other abbesses: she rejoiced in the beauty of creation, and in this occasional ‘adjustment’ of the rule of Benedict she was well ahead of her time.

There is a gap in our knowledge of Hildegard’s life between the ages of 8 and 14, but at that age she was ‘clothed’ as a Benedictine nun, with Jutta as ‘Magistra,’ and under the supervision of Abbot Kuno at Disibodenberg, and In 1136, on the death of Jutta, Hildegard was unanimously elected Abbess of her community, which had increased, in the meantime, with other young women from well-off families joining.

Sometime after her election, Hildegard announced that she would remove her community to Rupertsberg, near Bingen; hence her soubriquet.

One of Hildegard’s less celebrated gifts, but one that totally underpinned her successful career, was her ability to ‘work’ the ecclesiastical system of her day. This she managed partly by means of very adroit diplomacy; partly by sheer stubbornness, and partly by a form of manipulation that might be described nowadays as emotional, or moral blackmail. On two occasions, at least, when Hildegard couldn’t get her own way she was found to have sunk into a sort of coma from which she couldn’t be raised until the authorities relented and gave into her, at which point she was seen to suddenly revive.

At first the Abbot of Disibodenberg refused permission for Hildegard and her community to move, and for perfectly defensible motives on the surface. It was by no means certain that creating a new convent at Rupertsberg was going to be a success, but this perfectly innocent argument concealed a number of less worthy motives, although it must be admitted that most of the nuns, who came from well-off families, were set against moving away and roughing it while the new build was in process, which, in the event, took five years. The reality was that each of the new recruits brought large dowries along with them, of money, property etc, all of which was retained in the hands of Abbot Kuno; not to mention that by this time Hildegard had become something of a celebrity, and yet none of this money seemed to be coming the way of her community. Furthermore, the women looked after the monks, tending their illnesses, repairing their habits etc. Eventually Hildegard went over Abbot Kuno’s head, and received permission to move from the Archbishop of Mainz: she wanted independence for her community. It was at this point that Hildegard sunk into her famous paralysis until Kuno relented.

By the late 1140’s the ruins at Rupertsberg had been made into a splendid convent with running water in some of the rooms: the community still exists.

What we’re looking at here is a life of the profoundest transformation: the youngest of ten children, subject to seizures and, on her own admission, often coming out with the strangest things; it seems clear that her time with Jutta constituted what Michael Jacobs calls ‘a reparative relationship,’ making good whatever emotional damage Hildegard had suffered previously, and affirming her extraordinary gifts, whilst facilitating both a deep faith and self-confidence in her; we have a great deal for which to thank Jutta. Hildegard was separated from her family at age 8, and, like most children in her situation, she made her family where she found it. Nevertheless, it’s still possible to discern some of the less admirable traits of the gifted child.

Hildegard had two other nurturing relationships in her early life; her closest friend and favourite, Richardis von Stade, who often assisted her; and the monk Volmar, who, besides being Hildegard’s confessor, acted as P A, and encouraged her writings and helped deal with the abbot. In time both were taken from her, causing Hildegard the most intense grief. In the first instance Richardis’ family wished her to head up her own community, and Hildegard did everything she could to prevent her from doing so, including some more spiritual blackmail. In the event, Richardis did leave the convent, but died shortly afterwards. In the case of Volmar, she lapsed into another ‘coma’ which, on this occasion, failed to soften hearts.

In terms of diplomacy, however, Hildegard had learnt her stuff. As a woman, admittedly an abbess by now, but still well down the ecclesiastical food chain, she wasn’t going to risk the consequences of proclaiming her visions and prophecies from the roof-tops, so she wrote, in all humility, to some of the ‘big beasts,’ such as the Archbishop of Mainz and St Bernard himself, to check out whether they thought her visions might be coming from God or from the opposition. This way she got both of them onside, and when Bernard passed her records onto his one-time pupil, Pope Eugenius iii, excerpts from her work were read at the council of Trier in 1148, and thereafter her reputation was made.

Hildegard became a celebrity, and was even allowed to take on preaching tours of the German lands, speaking before high-ranking clerics and noble laity. Her wisdom and gifts were widely acknowledged outside Germany, and her convent became a locus for visitors and pilgrims seeking everything from mere blessing to spiritual guidance and direction, which Hildegard was always willing to offer. Like Bernard, she also ran a campaign of letter-writing, often expressing strong opinions; she almost consciously took on the role of prophet.

Hildegard’s international celebrity didn’t, however, prevent her and her community being punished in 1178 for having buried an excommunicated man in holy ground, which was forbidden. In consequence, the nuns were refused communion, and allowed to sing the Hours only in a whisper. Hildegard had been present when the man had been forgiven and received back into communion, and at age 80 she could be found at night, in a cemetery, with a lantern, digging up the soil in order to prevent the authorities finding where she’d buried the penitent. Totally unphased, she wrote to the relevant authorities explaining her actions, and the ban was lifted: the following year, 1179, Hildegard died.

Such was Hildegard’s life: So often it is the case that, as Leonard Cohen once proclaimed: ‘Every life has a crack by which the light enters;’ or words to that effect. However expressed, it’s a profound spiritual truth; but equally vital to God’s purpose seems to be the availability to the damaged individual of what Michael Jacobs calls ‘reparative relationships’ that make good and help heal the damage: Hildegard experienced this at first hand through Jutta, Richardis and Volmar, and was able to share her strength and hope with others. Here’s a quote from one of her letters; this one to a fellow abbess who was obviously in difficulties herself;

‘Mother, a person who doesn’t plough a field to make it grow crops is negligent: she’s refusing to till the field of her good master. In the same way that the stars illuminate the sky at night God made humanity to sparkle. We’re created for maturity: we’re made to give out light like the sun, the moon and the stars. If a black cloud covered these the earth and every creature in the world would worry that the end had come…. Daughter of God, the field is yours; your goodness embraces those in your care; don’t refuse to be their leader.’

Nowadays Hildegard has become such an ikon that she’s virtually untouchable by criticism, and, of course, many people whom we venerate as saints often behaved in ways we earthlings would identify as only human. Alice Miller, the psychotherapist, wrote a book some decades ago entitled ‘The drama of the gifted child:’ the book is sheer hell, and we all had ‘inner child’ up to the teeth, but the title, if nothing else, could serve as a description of Hildegard’s life.

At the end of this month the church celebrates Saint Jerome, whose achievements more than deserved the honour ‘Doctor of the Church,’ but behind their hands people have often wondered whether such a quarrelsome and often misguided individual should ever have been canonised. On the one hand canonising Catherine of Siena demonstrated the church’s compassion in accepting an obviously disturbed individual as a saint for her achievements in good works and theology, but perhaps one could make a case that whatever the diversity and magnificence of Hildegard’s creative self-expression, her conduct was often manipulative, self-willed and plainly selfish. As a Benedictine she had vowed obedience, and the rule expressly forbade favouritism, among the rank and file, and from an abbess it proved self-destructive and misguided. In the light of history her decision to let her charges express their femininity by relaxing regulations on dress has been vindicated and applauded, but that is to overlook her policy of restricting novices to members of the upper class, so as not to bring social differences into the mix. Quite understandably, with such a one-off in terms of her gifts and talents, it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that part of what was being generated, with the help of Bernard and his pet Pope was a personality cult, though whether or not this distraction has obscured our discernment of Hildegard as a saint is ultimately God’s business, and not ours. Did she leave the world a richer and better place? Undoubtedly so.

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THEODORE of TARSUS is an important figure in English church history for various reasons. He was born in Tarsus, Cilicia, in about 602, a Greek Asiatic, who had only attained the rank of Deacon before being chosen by the Pope to take over as Archbishop of Canterbury. Perhaps we tend to think of ourselves and our history as having developed in isolation, without any contact from the eastern church, whereas, in fact several of our early clergy and archbishops were raised in that tradition, to say nothing of the connections between the Celtic church and the east.

Theodore lived as a monk in one of the Greek monasteries in Rome until Pope Vitalian appointed and consecrated him for Canterbury in 669, although he was so concerned that his Greek background might corrupt his teaching that he sent Benedict Biscop and Hadrian, another monk along with him.

In the event Theodore proved to be an excellent choice. One of the first things he undertook was a tour of the whole country, before instigating some important reforms, such as completing its division into dioceses, and legislating against one bishop interfering in the work of another. He also contributed greatly towards the parish system. Similarly he made it an obligation on monks to stay where they were received, and not migrate to another [richer] monastery. All this and more were the result of two councils Theodore called, the first at Hertford in 673, and the second in 679. His was the first archiepiscopacy to enjoy the full support of the church country-wide, and he died in 690.

There was an unfortunate clash with St Wilfrid, who got himself consecrated as Archbishop of York by 12 Frankish bishops. On his return he found St Chad in possession, so he retired to Ripon until Theodore put him back into possession. So far so Good, until Theodore divided the diocese of York into three parts without consulting Wilfrid, who appealed to the pope and won his case. On returning to England, however, he was imprisoned, and on his release, sent to Sussex where he evangelised the pagans. Eventually there was a reconciliation with Theodore, at which point Wilfrid retired once more to Ripon, where he died in 691.

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Some time ago we looked at INI KOPURIA, a native of the Solomon islands, who left the coastal church settlement to work in the interior of his island in order to carry the faith to the people he knew there as a policeman. This relatively enlightened method of mission was pioneered in the area by Bishop JOHN COLERIDGE PATTESON, who was consecrated and sent out to be the first bishop of Melanesia aged only 28, by George Augustus Selwyn, whom he had known at Eton.

There are some very touching extracts from Patteson’s diary, expressing the kind of self-doubt and apprehension that anybody might have felt at the prospect of such a journey half-way across the world alone. Within a few years, however, we find him writing to his cousin rejoicing in the number of churches that have been set up and running successfully; and he goes on to express his confidence in the friendship and hospitality with which he is welcomed everywhere. He goes on to state that he is now able to travel safely into the interior, but it was during a visit to an island on which he had never set foot that he and his companions were murdered with clubs and arrows in 1871.

At this time there were a number of what were known by the islanders as ‘thief ships,’ or ‘blackbirders;’ Europeans who raided the islands to carry off natives as slaves to be sold in other colonies for work on farms etc. There had evidently been five people taken prisoner from this island, because when the bishop’s body was found there was a rope on his chest with five knots tied in it. An islander once asked him why such a good person as he clearly was would be sending these ‘thief ships.’ How might you have answered him?

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