



Heroes, Saints and Nobodies

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Some years ago a dedicated parishioner made a special request. Could I arrange for a number of Welsh hymns to be sung on March 1, to celebrate the patron saint of Wales, St. David? As I very much enjoy Welsh hymns, I saw no problem with that portion of the request. But the idea of celebrating a saint's day led me to consider the issue of saints in general, and the unique understanding of the idea of "sainthood" in the New Church.

On the one hand, we don't recognize the traditional or technical understanding of saint. You might hear someone invoke the name of Johnny Appleseed, or Helen Keller, or perhaps even Swedenborg, but ultimately, in the New Church, no one can claim any superior spiritual powers or standing over anyone else. But the term is still relevant. In this sermon, we will explore the nature and purpose of "sainthood" as a way to look at the issue of self-esteem, which is relevant to all of us. How do we esteem or value ourselves, and others? How do we see ourselves in relation to God and other people? Is our self-image positive, healthy and realistic; or is it distorted, negative, and false? Can any of say that we are saints? As usual, New Church doctrine invites us to re-examine some of our more basic beliefs and assumptions about life and human behavior, and how to "evaluate" or esteem it.

I want to start not with sainthood, but something a little more familiar: the hero. In one sense, we all know what a hero is. But there are shades of meaning here, and the dictionary can help us get started. There is first of all the mythic or religious sense of hero; a person, especially a warrior, of the Greek epic of heroic age. Similar to this is the person honored after death by public worship, because of exceptional service to mankind, and usually held to be in part at least of divine descent. Literature offers a

slightly different version of hero: it is the principal male personage, usually of noble character, in a poem, story, drama, or the like. More generally, a hero is a person of distinguished valor or fortitude, or one who takes an admiral part in any remarkable action or event; hence, a person regarded as a model.

Notice the difference between the mythical and religious sense of hero and the more common sense we are all familiar with. In olden days, the hero was defined almost exclusively in terms of war and combat; he was marked by divine ordination and inspiration, and generally was given a position of power, perhaps even king. Nowadays, we understand heroes to be mere mortals, like us, who seem to emerge from the midst of external and historical circumstances. They are human beings who exhibit “courage under fire,” enduring uncertainty and danger, achieving great things and saving others through sacrifice, strength and bravery. And, now as before, they are judged by the world as exciting, sensational, elevating, and very praiseworthy.

Turning to the idea of saints, the dictionary is again a useful place to start. There we find that the word saint comes from the word meaning “holy,” or “rendered sacred.” A saint is defined first as a holy or godly person, especially one regenerated and sanctified, or becoming sanctified. Also, a saint is one of the beatified souls, one who is recognized as having achieved sanctification, especially one canonized by the church. Finally, we read that a saint is one who is extraordinarily charitable, patient, self-denying, etc.

Notice again a difference between a saint as one sanctified by God, made holy, and one who is recognized or esteemed so by the church, or by other peoples' judgment. We all vacillate between these two meanings of the word "saint."

On the one hand, we recognize that saints, technically speaking, are determined and selected by the church through a complex and arcane procedure. Saints are a select group of people, existing high above us, possessing special powers of intercession and grace. On the other hand, we are also comfortable with a non-technical meaning of a saint as one who exhibits "grace under fire," who achieves an unusually high degree of spiritual growth and development, a deeper unity with God, not through strength and bravery, but through sacrifice, humility and obedience. Such saints are known for great works of charity and for helping others in the name of God; for spreading religion and for living lives that are righteous, faithful, pious, devoted to God. Unlike heroes, though, sainthood is judged by the world not as exciting, sensational, and praiseworthy, but as rather unexciting, tedious, even boring, but nonetheless praiseworthy. In other words, everyone wants to be like Princess Diana, but no one can. No one wants to be like Mother Theresa, but anyone can.

You see the problem? Our idea of a saint is all mixed up with other ideas. For example, our idea of a hero as one who is self-sufficient, exceedingly brave and resourceful, strong in and from himself. This idea, held up to all as a model to imitate, contains within it the seeds of pride and conceit in victory, or of shame and despair in defeat. It leads us to rely on ourselves, to take credit for what is good and true in our lives, and to avoid responsibility for what is evil and false. Or we may see saints as somehow better than us, more deserving, more loved by God, safer from temptation,

living above us in some attainable realm of spirit. There can be anxiety about our own inability to measure up to such impossibly high standards; we all know deep down how far we fall short. Our unclear thinking about sainthood merely increases that sense of fallenness out of proportion. In fact, though, none of us are that great *or* that horrible.

Whether we privately praise ourselves as being heroes or saints, or privately envy those whom we praise as heroes or saints, we cannot experience good self-esteem, we cannot value ourselves as children of God, we cannot open ourselves to a higher power in a spirit of humility and obedience. Only by emptying ourselves of the illusions of pride, heroism, specialness, can we become filled with the reality of God's greater love and acceptance for us. This is healthy self-esteem.

Those in hell who are strong and skilled in falsity appear to have great power, and are therefore called heroes. (*SD* §6037) Isaiah condemns those who are “heroes at drinking wine,” which represent those who aspire to great things, and who have ability and skill in adulterating the truths of the Word (*AE* §376.37) Such heroism, of course, is nothing but an illusion, generated by pride and fear and hostility toward others. It is no different with us mortals, who are quick to take credit for our strengths and abilities, seeking praise and reward.

As the Lord alone conquered the hells, without the aid of any angel, he alone is rightly called a “hero,” and a “man of war.” (*TCR* §116.3) It is the Lord who fights our spiritual battles, who brings us to victory and a new day. It is the Lord who inspires and guides and strengthens us, and others, to achieve great things in his name, to conquer indwelling evils and falsehoods, to live in charity toward the neighbor.

Those in hell do not use the word saint, but hero: one who is strong in and from himself. Those in heaven do not use the word hero, but saint: one who is strong in and from the Lord. Ultimately, we can all be saints, but only God can be a true “hero,” one who is strong and saving in himself.

Instead of equating sainthood and holiness with poverty, labor, and sacrifice of material things, or with miraculous and supernatural powers, the New Church teaches us that a saint is anyone who acknowledges God and strives to live according to God’s will, as he or she understands it.

“He who in his belief acknowledges and in his heart worships one God is both in the communion of the saints on earth and in the communion of the angels in heaven. These are called “communions,” and are communions, because such are in the one God and the one God is in them. Moreover, they are in conjunction with the entire angelic heaven, and, I might venture to say, with all and each of its inhabitants, for they are all like the children and descendants of one father, whose dispositions, manners, and features are similar, whereby they recognize each other.”¹ - *TCR* §15

All who follow God appear before him as a unity, one person, the communion of saints. Saints are all those who emphasize charity over faith, and ignorance over knowledge; they are those who are in truth from good, that is, in charity (*AE* 893).

¹ Swedenborg, Emanuel, and John C. Ager. *True Christian Religion*. New York: The American Swedenborg Printing and Publishing Society, 1906.

Saints are all those who acknowledge the all of God, and the nothingness of self in relation to God (*AC* §951)

Which brings us to nobodies: nobody wants to be a nobody, but then again, he would! But don't worry, nobody is a nobody! Scripture tells us to "Praise God, *all* you his servants, you who fear him, small *and* great." And Swedenborg reminds us that "the Divine is the same in things least and great." The external standards and criteria of the world, whether they are used to measure heroes or villains, saints or demons, can only fall short of the Divine standard by which are all truly measured: God's love for each of us.

It matters little to God whether we are brave or successful or praised by others; it matters little to God whether we are rewarded as a hero or worshipped as a saint. For in God's eyes, we are each his child, nothing in ourselves, but everything in him. To judge ourselves by the world standards, to accept the world's judgment of ourselves, is either to be filled with pride, thinking ourselves somebody when we are not, or to be filled with shame, thinking we are nobody when we are somebody. Hero worship and low self-esteem go together!

The 19th chapter of the book of Revelation picks up just after the Lord's final victory over evil, represented by Babylon, and just before his final battle with falsity, represented by the Beast. The saints and elders and angels are praising God for his salvation: it is a rare instance of healthy hero-worship. John, who is witnessing these events under the direction of an angel, falls down to worship him. But the angel tells

him, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus Christ. Worship God.”²

The church tells us that the meaning of this passage is that no angel in heaven is to be adored or invoked, but only the Lord. All men are brothers and sisters; no one has anything intrinsically divine within him that he can call his own, for all divinity, all love and truth, are from God. Saints are those who recognize that all people belong to God, who acknowledge the Divine-Humanity of the Lord, and live in accordance with the 10 commandments. This is what it is to be a saint. To cease from hero worship, or from striving to appear heroic, and to rest in the power of God.

Of course, heroes, as we know commonly understand them, will emerge now and again. But let us keep such hero-worship in perspective. Let us confess our gratitude for those who labor on our behalf, but more importantly, let us confess our gratitude for God, the ultimate source and cause of all things good and true. Let us acknowledge the spiritual equality of all people as children of one God, neither worshipping some as saints, nor demonizing and condemning others as Godless or unworthy of our love. Let us accept the humbling yet strengthening truth that each of us was created for sainthood, which is nothing more, or less, than acknowledging God and living according to God’s will, as best *we* can, each in our own unique way. This *is* within the grasp of each of us, for even now God offers the light of his truth and the warmth of his love for us to receive.

² *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.