

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A Huge Number

I have always marvelled at great numbers. When we look on some multitudinous sight, like the Victoria Falls, aunts, migrating birds, or the wild flowers on a high plateau: or when physicists talk about astronomical distances, or the number of the stars, or when chemists speak about the components of matter, the mind begins to lose its fancied hold on the greatness of the universe. If it is impossible for us to grasp the greatnesses of our planet, how are we to read the divine mind which *calls all the stars by their name, and not one fails to answer?* The speculation that there might be other inhabited “earths” in the inconceivable gulfs of space is one which stuns us into silence.

How great is God?

The imagining of vastness has always marked religious thought; we have responded to the staggering effects of worldly greatness by seeking the mighty figure of their Creator and Master. Perhaps this is a place where we need to be instructed by our forebears. Their world-view comprehended much less than ours, and their view of God was accordingly on a scale commensurate with their understanding of the world. For people who seldom travelled, and saw little of the world, the concept of our furthest space-probes would be unimaginable. But we know that the rockets that journey over several years to the other planets of our solar system are traversing a tiny fraction of the galactic spaces, let alone the universe that streams beyond them. The God who created this is right to say: *Make no image of anything earthly, to worship it.* A God comprehensible to us would deserve more suspicion than worship: God is not in our image.

The Number of the Saints

Canonization is a bit like the rocket-probe - the tiniest venture into vast realms of unknown dimension. We cannot know the number of the saints, even if fundamentalists like Jehovah’s Witnesses claim to have worked it out from the Apocalypse. But we might like to acknowledge the habit of St Paul, who referred to the people in his congregation as “the saints”, or St Augustine, who addressed his North African congregations as “your holinesses”. If these great and inspired men thought they were surrounded by saints, we should think the same. After all, even they were sinners, and in need of the glory of God. God is no respecter of persons, and can find the holiness which he seeks in humble and lowly places.

Noantri

This word is a grotty bit of Roman dialect belonging to the ornery people of Trastevere. It derives from

“noi altri” and means roughly “the rest of us”, “us others”. Once a year they celebrate the *fiesta di Noantri*, as if to say, “We aren’t great enough to be canonized, but we still deserve a feast!” I think of the unsung saints, the faithful, hopeful, loving people who stay with their promises, are loyal to their trust in God, and who give, and give, work and work, for the Kingdom to come. Rightly do the Beatitudes speak of the blessed poor in spirit, the gentle and pure, the hungry-for-justice, the ready-to-suffer, the peacemakers, the bereaved: their credentials may sometimes look most shaky in the world; but they are royalty in the eyes of God. They are not to be bought for gold, they are unswayed by power or possession, they are immovable in their sense of justice. They are the ones called in the Apocalypse “a great number *impossible to count*”; and surely the Bible means that they are not to be recognized, that they are hidden. When a human eye tries to number them, it will fail, because their holiness is known only to God. *But we do know it is there!* It would be wonderful if this meditation could alert us to this presence of the saints, and replace the horrid modern culture of disparagement and contempt with a humble awareness that the mystery of the Kingdom is indeed alive and well, and that it is in the midst of us. Let it not be said that we have to wait for people to die, and to be declared worthy by some Vatican committee, before we allow ourselves to be warmed, encouraged, inspired, and comforted by their holiness. *Fr*

Philip