

## **True 10 Reformers: Introduction**

"Humans must be changed by religion, not religion by humans." - Giles of Viterbo, Fifth Lateran Council, 1512 The saints are the glory of the Church. They are the clearest expression of the Church's divine mission and life-transforming power, and the surest sign of hope for those who are walking the homeward road in their company.

A question often asked is whether or not Christianity "works." Can its claims be believed? Has it made good on its promises? Does it represent a successful attempt at ordering human affairs? Often these days the sharply returned answer is "no!"

Our age is keenly aware and highly critical of the sins and faults of former times, occasionally even with accuracy. There are many who take issue with the Church, claiming that Christianity has been a failure. Their case is well prepared. For starters, look at the periods of so-called Christian society: one need not go through the litany of alleged faults, from the Crusades to the Inquisition to Galileo; they are repeated so often as to have become catchphrases. Then further, look at the history of the institutional Church itself. Often among the leaders of the Church - bishops and priests and monks and nuns - examples of greed, sensuality, and desire for power are not hard to find. Even where more blatant sins are not in evidence, there often lurks a spirit of small-mindedness, of pettiness and selfishness, rather than the large-hearted, noble, and generous spirit promised by the Gospel. What happened to the high Christian ideal of restoring all things, of forming a new kind of human being, of participating in divine power, of loving one another with supernatural help? Then the gaze shifts to the present. It is easy to find examples of bad behavior among Catholics, from the scandalous activity of misbehaving priests to the less sensational but more common experience of lukewarmness and hypocrisy among the laity. Doesn't all of this point to a failed idea? However much we may admire the personality of Jesus, and whatever positive qualities the theoretical vision of Christianity may possess, has not the Church shown itself incapable of making real what it so eloquently professes?

And then one encounters the diamond-hard reality of the saints. An essential aspect of the Church as founded by Christ is that it is both a divine and a human institution. This combination of humanity and divinity, a mixture that has often been found offensive to spiritually sensitive people, is God's preferred mode of artistry. He takes up the theme in whatever he does, weaving together in indescribable ways matter and spirit, the mortal and the immortal, the Creator and the creature, in all his great works. The mixture can be seen in his conception of the human, this odd being composed of both body and spirit, bound by time and

space but with a capacity and a corresponding longing for a divine destiny. The theme shows up in the way God brought forth his written word, the Sacred Scriptures, writings of varied forms and languages generated over more than a thousand years, penned by many different hands and minds - all very human processes - yet nonetheless authored by the Holy Spirit and possessing a divine quality and an authority unlike any other book. The theme is expressed most forcibly, even shockingly, in the union of the divine Son of God, the Eternal Logos, with a specific human being at a particular time and place, Creator and creature locked in a mysterious unity. And the theme takes form in the Church, a visible institution with every possible kind of human aspect - governmental, relational, cultural, economic, organizational - made up of and run by flawed men and women, yet mysteriously the very Body of Christ present in the world.

In the case of the Church, this penchant on the part of God to mingle the divine and the human is especially remarkable. In Jesus, the Divine Son was united to a human nature that was, as we are told in the New Testament, like us in everything but sin. In the Church, God in Christ has deepened his solidarity with humanity; he has united himself to humans, who are like us in everything including sin. So we are faced with this mystery, one that requires the new eyes of faith properly to receive: Christ, the perfect one, establishes the Church as his Body and lives in close union with humans, none of whom are perfect, and some of whom are admittedly far from perfect.

The saints are given to us in order to perceive this mystery at work. It is in their shining example that the promises of God to renew the human race are made most visible.

The Church has often been described as a kind of hospital, a place where a diseased and wounded humanity is in the process of being brought back to life and health. Jesus used the figure of himself as a physician, and the parable of the Good Samaritan, who arranged for the care and healing of a man who had been beaten, robbed, and left for dead, has traditionally been interpreted as an image of Christ caring for fallen humanity through the Church. While the image of a hospital does not exhaust the Church's nature, it is particularly apt for dealing with some of the challenges facing our age in understanding the Church's essence.

A hospital implies sickness; patients are admitted in order to be treated and to regain health. "Those who are well have no need of a physician," said Jesus, "but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Lk 5:31-32). Christ came to heal a race riddled with the fatal disease of sin. He

then founded the Church as a means of effecting his perpetual presence as physician. To those who come to that hospital for care, he gives medicine for their healing and prescriptions and protocols for their continued recovery. No one should be surprised to find illness in a doctor's office; no one would be silly enough to suggest that a hospital filled with sick people was failing in its duty. The only question would be whether or not the patients were getting better.

We live in the first age of history that has not only doubted the efficacy of the Divine Physician's cure, but has denied the existence of the disease. Previous societies had no difficulty understanding that they were seriously ill, afflicted with grave moral guilt. When a remedy for their disease was proposed, the issue was to determine whether it was a good or a bad remedy - whether or not it improved the condition of the patient. All that has now changed. Modern societies are dominated by the determination to do away with the idea of Original Sin. There is nothing wrong with us - so we endlessly repeat to ourselves - at least nothing we cannot handle on our own. If there is a problem to be solved, it is not within us; it is rather to be found outside of us, in how the world is structured. So we conveniently sidestep the need for personal moral reformation. If only we can find a way to fix the system, those who live within it will be fine. In the grip of this state of denial, we dislike going to the Divine Doctor, not so much because we doubt his skill, as because he gives us a diagnosis we are unwilling to accept. An age that denies the existence of the disease will find it hard to deal accurately with its symptoms.

To understand the Church and her mission, we will first need to be clear about the very sick state of the humanity among whom she has been established and who make up her members. We will need to avoid the false expectations that come from a delusional view of the human condition. We will be grateful if those who come to the hospital are able to receive their remedy and begin to get better, knowing that the final cure will take place in God's own time, when this age of mercy has run its course and the Kingdom of God is finally and fully established.

This understanding of the true state of humanity can help in assessing one popular current of thought that calls Christianity a failure. Much of the intensity of this sentiment comes from the essentially Utopian attitude of most of our contemporaries. Having denied Original Sin, our society is left thinking that we really can fundamentally fix the world. So we set out to eradicate injustice, greed, lust for power, trafficking in humans, even sadness and loneliness, and we put forward our plans to fashion a world of peace, happiness, and justice. Seen through this lens, Christianity is thought to be one among a number of programs designed to accomplish these Utopian goals; and from this point of view, the results of two

thousand years of Christianity are far from overwhelming. The influence of the Church on whole cultures and civilizations can hardly be denied, yet we seem no closer to our envisaged paradise than we were before Christ arrived. Christianity is thus judged to have been a failure, because it has not decisively eradicated the evils that have beset us.

But this is a profound misunderstanding of what Christianity has claimed to do and to be. Christ did not come to turn the earth into a paradise—not yet. Christians have never believed that all evil, or even most of it, could be overcome in the current age of the world. Christ came "to bear witness to the truth" (Jn 18:37), and from the beginning of salvation history the evidence is not great that humans on the whole have desired truth. At his birth, Jesus was spoken of by Simeon as "the fall and rising of many" and a sign of contradiction (Lk 2:34).

The Church is accomplishing her mission when she is true to her Founder, when she bears witness to the truth of Christ, and when she helps those who desire Christ along a path of healing and of hope in a coming Kingdom. Jesus himself was not universally hailed and honored; quite the opposite.

How then is the success or failure of the Church to be assessed most clearly? The measure of her success will be found in the personalities of the saints, her truest and most representative members. The saints are those who rise with Christ; they are examples of the kind of transformation possible for those who are willing to take the Divine Doctor at his word, and who are ready to follow his prescriptions. They are a sure sign of the continuing presence of Christ in the world.

An objection might still be argued: if the Church is a kind of hospital, then by rights those who come to it for care should find their spiritual and moral state improving. It is true that we are not surprised to find sick people in a hospital, but we would be troubled if we found that a stay in the hospital was not doing the patients any good. And it cannot be denied that at least some members of the Church seem to be getting no better. Some may appear to be getting worse. Given this reality - one that Christians have always been the first to admit (as evidenced through the Scriptures) - there are two possible explanations for the lack of improvement among a portion of the patients. It could be that Christianity is false, that Christ is not a true physician but only a quack doctor, and that his medicines are useless and his protocols are without effect. This is the judgment favored by many in our society. But there is a second possible explanation. It could be that Christ really is an excellent physician whose treatment is exactly suited for curing the ills of humanity, but that many of his patients, despite having lodged

themselves in the hospital, will not submit to his care. As a result, their sickness lingers or grows worse.

What then should we say when so much sin is found in people who call themselves Christians? We would first want to know whether those who showed so little moral improvement and seemed so lacking in their spiritual life were following the Doctor's orders. Were they taking their medicine? Did they follow the prescribed course of healing? If those who sought God in Christ - who came regularly to the Sacraments to receive his help and who tried their best to follow the life of love he demanded - showed no sign of moral or spiritual growth, the criticism would be telling. But what if it were found that the very people whose disease remained stubbornly present were precisely those who least obeyed the Doctor? Who would blame a physician for the bad health of a patient who refused to take his medicine and who defied everything his doctor prescribed? It is a sad truth that many in the Church pay little attention to Christ and to his prescriptions for addressing their ills and show correspondingly little evidence of cure.

Once again the saints are the model. The saint is not a different species of human—a religious genius, a moral wonder, a prodigy of spiritual sensitivity. The saint is that normal person who has responded with readiness to God's initiative, who follows closely the directions of the divine physician, and who attempts to embrace his will most completely. The saints show just how potent Christ's cure can be. They make clear what can happen to a diseased human soul that is willing to be entirely overtaken by the love of God.

There remains yet one more explanation for the seeming failure of the Church, one that will touch on the subject of this book. It could be that Christ really is a true physician and that there are many patients who are willing to place themselves in his care and to follow his guidance. But what would happen if those whose job it was to care for the sick under the direction of the master physician grew lazy and greedy and began to take advantage of those who came to them for help? What if they provided fake medicines or passed on protocols that did not come from the doctor or neglected their patients altogether? What if there was serious corruption among the hospital staff? When Jesus gathered a group of disciples to be his witnesses - his arms and legs and voice to the world - he conferred an extraordinary dignity on humans. But with that dignity came also a perilous responsibility. Fallen humans were given the task of representing Christ to others: of speaking words of truth, doing deeds of love, and caring for their fellow humans as a participation in the care of the Good Shepherd. "He who receives you receives me" (Mt 10:40). It would have been easier for us if Christ had set up a Church run

by a special cadre of angelic beings. It would have made things simpler if those who led the Church, who preached the Gospel and who served as examples of charity and justice, were themselves perfect beings. Simpler, but far less dignifying to humanity. The reality of Christ's solidarity with us can be embarrassing in its depth and its intimacy.

Because the Church is made up of sinful humans, because even the best of her members are far from perfect, she is in constant need of reform. That need is present for each individual disciple, who bears the daily task of refocusing the heart's gaze on what is true and good, who moment by moment looks toward Christ and away from all that is not of his Kingdom. But the same holds true for the Church as a body. Because the Church exists to be a light in the midst of a darkened world, she faces the constant temptation to conform to the world's dark ways. The commitment of Christ to live among a fallen race brings with it the real possibility that his Body might forget her divine destiny and become re-infected with the world's diseases. The Church is thus ever repenting and reforming, ever renewing herself in the image of Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit who inhabits her life.

In matters of reform, the saints are once again decisive. True reform is a matter of regaining and maintaining the true image of Christ, and the true reformer is the one who most fully expresses the image of Christ in all facets of life. It has been said that the Church is not a democracy; it has often come almost as an accusation that the Church does not settle matters of truth, justice, or goodness by majority vote. But if the Church is not a democracy, she is not a monarchy either, not in the usual sense of that word. True, Christ is the King, the Head of his Body, and in that sense the Church is gloriously monarchical. But in putting Christ's kingship into action through the ministries of his servants, in matters of polity, in making her way through the world, in sorting out the many issues and challenges she faces in a constantly changing human environment, the Church operates neither as a monarchy nor as a democracy. She moves forward mysteriously as a kind of oligarchy of the influence of the saints. When all is said and done, when the dust of the frenzied moment settles, when the broad lines of the Church's life can be traced through time, an astonishing truth emerges. The Church has not simply gone the way of her popes, or her bishops, or her theologians, or her councils, or the majority of her believing members. Instead, the Church has followed her saints; and when she has followed popes or bishops or theologians, she has done so especially when they were saints, or because they were following the tracks marked out by saints. The Church will be found to have kept careful tabs, by an ineffable spiritual sense, on those remarkable responders to the grace of God. "Be

imitators of me, as I am of Christ," said St. Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:1). So the Corinthians did; and so the Church has done down through the centuries, imitating those imitators of Christ, the saints.

This means that if we want to comprehend the essence of the Church, we need to become acquainted with her most characteristic members, the saints. If we want evidence of the transformative power of the Gospel, we should seek it in the lives of those who took the Gospel most seriously: the saints. If we want to understand the nature of true reform, we will find its pattern in the lives and in the teaching of the true reformers of the Church: the saints.

The sixteenth century, the time during which the reforming saints chronicled in this book lived, was for Europe an age of profound change. The medieval system that had pertained for many centuries was breaking down. European society was being altered in significant ways - demographically, economically, politically, and geographically - in a process that was putting a great strain on existing institutions. Populations were rapidly growing and a new educated and literate middle class was emerging. New centers of cultural and political power were gathering at the courts of European monarchies. The invention of the printing press made the Scriptures and other spiritual writings easily accessible and whetted the appetite of the age for greater theological clarity and consistency. A renewed and deepened encounter with classical civilization through the recovery of many ancient texts was creating a ferment in the mind of the age. A higher standard was being demanded in many areas of life, not least in that most important area of all: religion. At the same time, Christendom was hard-pressed to protect itself from an increasingly potent Ottoman empire and was both challenged and intoxicated as the worlds of Asia and the Americas came into its vision. In the midst of this seething change, the key institution of society, the Church, was in dire need of reform. Old patterns were no longer working; old arrangements that had once served their turn were proving ineffective or corrupting. For a number of generations, the call had been voiced by all serious believers: "Reform in head and members!"

Noted historian Christopher Dawson summed up the situation facing the sixteenth-century Church this way: "The hierarchy and the government of the Church were in a state of grave disorder and had failed again and again to find a remedy for the worst abuses or to make provision for the most urgent needs of the time. The Papacy had become involved in the complicated game of Italian power politics and was primarily concerned with the creation of an independent principality. The bishops throughout Northern Europe were equally involved in national politics,

whether as ministers of the crown in France and England and Burgundy, or as independent secular princes, as in Germany. Everywhere the Church was bowed down by the weight of her possessions, which no longer served spiritual ends but were used by kings and popes to endow their relatives or reward their servants. In consequence, the Church became more and more secularized, both as being involved in secular business and being governed by men with secular aims and ambitions. Everyone recognized the existence of these evils and everyone demanded their reform. But so many vested interests were involved and so many legal precedents, privileges and exemptions existed that every attempt at reform was frustrated again and again.

Historians have observed that revolutions most often occur, not when things are at their dismal worst, but rather during times of rising expectations. In such times, what had been previously at least an adequate state of affairs no longer satisfies the higher standards of a new age. The sixteenth century was just such a time of rising expectations in religious matters, and of a loss of patience with problems in the path of reform. It was an age of deep religious faith and great religious ferment, of strong and colorful personalities who responded to God amid the circumstances of their time in ways that continue to influence the Church and the world to this day.

Among the most remarkable of those personalities were the ten saints in this volume, whose lives exemplify the way Church reform was furthered by lay men and women, priests, contemplatives, bishops, and popes. Seeing how they responded to the challenges of their age will help us to understand the times in which they lived - and more than that, hopefully it will be an inspiration and a source of wisdom for meeting the demands of our own rapidly changing and highly challenging age.