



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. III.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, JULY 22, 1853.

NO. 50.

INTRODUCTION TO COUNT DE MONTALEMBERT'S LIFE OF ST. ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY.

(Continued from No. 48.)

So many charms—so much interest in the brief mortal existence of this young woman, are neither the creation of the poet's fancy, nor the fruit of piety exaggerated by distance; they are, on the contrary, verified by all the authority of history. The profound impression which the destiny and the heroic virtues of Elizabeth made on her age, is manifested by the tender and scrupulous care wherewith men have gathered and transmitted from generation to generation the most trifling actions of her life, the least words that she uttered, with a thousand incidents which throw light on the innermost recesses of that pure and artless soul. We are thus enabled, at the distance of six centuries, to give an account of that blessed life, with all the familiar and minute details which we little expect to find save in memoirs recently written—and with circumstances so poetic, we would almost say so romantic,—that we can scarcely help regarding them at first as the results of an excited imagination taking pleasure in embellishing with all its charms a heroine of romance. And yet the historical authenticity of most of these details cannot be suspected, being collected at the same time as her miracles and verified by solemn investigations immediately after her death, and registered by grave historians, in the national and contemporaneous annals which record the other events of the time. In the eyes of those pious annalists, who wrote, as the people of those days acted, under the exclusive empire of faith, so fair a victory for Christ—so much charity and solicitude for the poor with such shining manifestations of the power of God, wrought by a creature so fragile and so young, appeared as a sweet place of rest amid the storm of battles, wars and political revolutions.

And not only is this life—so poetical and, at the same time, so edifying—certified by history, but it has received an otherwise high sanction; it has been invested with a splendor before which the mere products of imagination—worldly renown, and the popularity given by historians and orators must all wax dim;—it has been adorned with the fairest crown that is known to man—that of the *Saint*. It has been glorified by the homage of the Christian world. It has received that popularity of prayer, the only one that is eternal—universal—the only one that is decreed at once by the learned and the rich—by the poor, the wretched, the ignorant—by that immense mass of mankind who have neither time nor inclination to busy themselves with human glories. And for those who are influenced by imagination, what happiness to feel that so much poetry, so many charming incidents, illustrative of all that is freshest and purest in the human heart, may be remembered, extolled—not indeed in the pages of a romance, or on the boards of a theatre, but under the vaulted roofs of our churches, at the foot of the holy altars, in the effusion of the Christian soul before its God!

It may be that, blinded by that involuntary partiality which we feel for that which has been the object of a study and an attachment of several years, we exaggerate the beauty and the importance of our subject. We doubt not that, even apart from all the imperfection of our work, many may find out that an age so remote has nothing in common with this of ours; that this biography so minute, that this description of customs so long exploded can present no profitable and positive result to the religious ideas of our time; the simple and pious souls, for whom alone we write, shall be our judge. The author of this book has made a graver objection to himself; seduced, at first, by the poetical, legendary, and even romantic character which the life of St. Elizabeth presents to a cursory view, he found himself as it were, according as he advanced, engaged in the study of an admirable development of the ascetic strength engendered by faith,—with the revelation of the most profound mysteries of Christian initiation; he then asked himself whether he had a right to undertake such a work, whether the sublime triumphs of religion were not to be reserved for writers who could do honor to religion, or who, at least, might be exclusively devoted to it. He could not but feel that he had no mission for such a work, and it was with tremulous apprehension that he accomplished a task which seems so unsuited to his weakness, his age and his lay character.

Nevertheless, after long hesitation, he yielded to the impulsive idea of giving some connection to studies so protracted and so conscientious, together with the desire of presenting to the friends of religion, and of historical truth, the faithful and complete picture of the life of a Saint of former days,—of one of those beings who summed up within themselves all the faith and all the pure affections of the Christian ages; to paint them, as much as possible, in the hues

of their time, and to show them in all the splendor of that perfect beauty wherewith they presented themselves to the minds of men in the middle ages.

We are well aware that, to reproduce such a life in all its integrity, it is necessary to place ourselves face to face with a whole order of facts and of ideas long since struck with reprobation by the vague religiosity of latter times, and which a timorous though sincere piety has too often excluded from religious history. We allude to the supernatural phenomena so abundant in the lives of the Saints, consecrated by faith under the name of miracles, and eschewed by worldly wisdom under the name of "legends,"—"popular superstitions,"—"fabulous traditions." Many such are found in the life of St. Elizabeth. These we have endeavored to reproduce with the same scrupulous exactness which we have used in all the rest of the narrative. The very thought of omitting, or even of extenuating them—interpreting them with prudent moderation, would have been revolting to us. It would have appeared to us a sacrilege to gloss over or conceal what we believe to be true, to pander to the proud reason of our age; it would have been a culpable error, too, for these miracles are related by the same authors, established by the same authority as are all the other events of our biography. Nor could we well have fixed any rule whereby to admit their veracity in some cases and reject it in others; in short, it would have been nothing better than hypocrisy, for we candidly acknowledge that we firmly believe all that has ever been recorded as most miraculous of the Saints of God in general, and of St. Elizabeth in particular. Nor does this imply any sort of victory over our own weak reason; for nothing appeared to us more reasonable, more simple for a Christian, than to bend in gratitude before the Lord's mercy, when he sees it suspend or modify the natural laws which it alone has created, to secure and enhance the triumph of the still higher laws of the moral and religious order. Is it not both sweet and easy to conceive how souls like those of St. Elizabeth and her contemporaries, exalted by faith and humility far above the cold reasoning of this world, purified by every sacrifice and every virtue, accustomed to live beforehand in heaven, presented to the goodness of God a theatre ever prepared; how much, too, the fervent and simple faith of the people called forth, and, if we may venture to say so, justified the frequent and familiar intervention of that Almighty power which rejects and disowns the insensate pride of our days!

Hence it is with a mixture of love and respect that we have long studied those innumerable traditions of faithful generations, wherein faith and Christian poetry,—the highest lessons of religion and the most delightful creations of the imagination are blended in a union so intimate that it can by no means be dissolved. But even if we had not the happiness of believing with entire simplicity in the wonders of divine power, which they relate, never could we venture to despise the innocent belief which has moved and delighted millions of our brethren for so many ages; all that is puerile in them is elevated and sanctified to us, by having been the object of our fathers' faith—of our fathers who were nearer Christ than we are. We have not the heart to despise what they believed with so much fervor, loved with so much constancy. Far from that: we will freely confess that we have often found in them both help and consolation, and in this we are not alone; for if they are every where despised by people who call themselves learned and enlightened, there are still places where these sweet traditions have remained dear to the poor and the simple. We have found them cherished in Ireland, in the Tyrol, and especially in Italy, and in more than one of the French provinces; we have gathered them from the words of the people, and the tears which flowed from their eyes; they have still an altar in the fairest of all temples—the hearts of the people. We will even venture to say that something is wanting to the human glory of those Saints who have not been invested with this touching popularity—who have not received, with the homage of the Church, that tribute of humble love and familiar confidence which is paid under the cottage-roof, by the evening hearth, from the mouth and heart of the unlettered poor. Elizabeth, endowed by heaven with such absolute simplicity, and who, in the midst of royal splendor, preferred to all other society that of the poor and the miserable; Elizabeth, the friend, the mother, the servant of the poor, could not be forgotten by them; and in that sweet remembrance do we find the secret of the charming incidents which we shall have to relate.

But this is not the place to discuss that grave question of the credence due to the miracles in the lives of the Saints; it suffices for us to have declared our own point of view; even had it been different, it would not have prevented us from writing the life of St. Elizabeth, from showing all that Catholics be-

lieved of her, and giving an account of the glory and the influence which her miracles have obtained for her amongst the faithful. In all medieval study, the implicit faith of the people, the unanimity of public opinion, give, to the popular traditions inspired by religion, a force which the historian cannot but appreciate. So that even independent of their theological value, one cannot, without blindness, overlook the part which they have at all times played in poetry and in history.

With regard to poetry, it would be difficult to deny that they contain an inexhaustible mine; a fact which will be every day recognised more and more, according as the human mind returns to the source of true beauty. Even were we forced to regard these legends but as the *Christian mythology*, according to the contemptuous expression of the great philosophers of our days, still we should find in them a source of poetry infinitely more pure, abundant and original than the worn-out mythology of Olympus. But how can we be surprised that they have been so long refused all right to poetic influence. The idolatrous generations who had concentrated all their enthusiasm on the monuments and institutions of paganism, and the impious generations who have dignified with the name of poetry the filthy effusions of the last century, could neither of them give even a name to that exquisite fruit of Catholic faith; they could offer it only one kind of homage; viz., that of scoffing and insult,—this they have done.

In a purely historical point of view, popular traditions, and especially those which belong to religion, if they have not a mathematical certainty—if they are not what are called positive facts, they are, at least, quite as powerful, and have exercised a far greater power over the passions and morals of the people than facts the most incontestible for human reason. On this account they assuredly merit the respect and attention of every serious historian and profound critic.

So it ought to be with every man who is interested in the supremacy of spiritualism in the progress of the human race;—who places the worship of moral beauty above the exclusive domination of material interests and inclinations. For it must not be forgotten that, at the basis of all beliefs—even the most puerile,—and superstitions the most absurd that have prevailed at any time amongst Christian people, there was always a formal recognition of supernatural power, a generous declaration in favor of the dignity of man—fallen indeed—but not irretrievably. Every where and always there was stamped on these popular convictions the victory of mind over matter, of the invisible over the visible, of the innocent glory of man over his misfortune, of the primitive purity of nature over its corruption. The most trifling Catholic legend has gained more hearts to those immortal truths than all the dissertations of philosophers. It is always the sentiment of that glorious sympathy between the Creator and the creature, between heaven and earth, which beams upon us through the mists of ages; but whilst pagan antiquity stammered out this idea, giving its gods all the vices of humanity, Christian ages here proclaimed it, elevating humanity and the world regenerated by faith, to the very height of heaven.

In the ages of which we speak, such apologies as these would have been superfluous. No one in Christian society doubted the truth and the ineffable sweetness of these pious traditions. Men lived in a sort of tender and intimate familiarity with those amongst their fathers whom God had manifestly called to himself, and whose sanctity the Church had proclaimed. That Church, who had placed them on her altars, certainly could not blame her children if they thronged, with indefatigable tenderness, to lay the flowers of their mind and their imagination before those witnessings of eternal truth. They had already received the palm of victory; those who were still doing battle delighted to congratulate them, and to learn from them how to conquer. Ineffable affections, salutary connections were thus formed between the saints of the Church triumphant and the humble combatants of the Church militant. Each one chose from that glorified company a father—a mother—a friend—under whose protection he walked with greater confidence and security towards the eternal light. From the king and the pontiff down to the poorest artisan, each had a special thought in heaven; in the midst of warfare, in the dangers and sorrows of life, these holy friendships exercised their strengthening and consoling influence. St. Louis, dying beyond the seas for the Cross, fervently invoked the humble shepherdess who was the protectress of his capital. The brave Spaniards, overpowered by the Moors, beheld St. James—their patron—in the midst of their ranks, and, returning to the charge, speedily turned the scale of victory. The knights and nobles had for their patrons St. Michael and St. George; for their patronesses, St. Catharine and St. Margaret; and if they

happened to die as prisoners and martyrs for the faith they invoked St. Agnes, who had bent her young and virginal head beneath the axe. The laborer saw in the Churches the image of St. Isidore with his plough, and of St. Nothburga, the poor Tyrolese servant, with her sickle. The poor, in general, the lowly and the hard-working—met at every step that gigantic St. Christopher bending under the weight of the Child Jesus, and found in him the model of that hard life of toil whose harvest is heaven. Germany was peculiarly fertile in such pious practices; as we now clearly perceive, while studying its pure and artless spirit, so totally void of the sarcasm, the scoffing sneer which blights all poetry, while studying its language so rich and so expressive. It would be an endless task to specify all the innumerable bonds which thus connected heaven and earth,—to penetrate into that vast region, where all the affections and all the duties of mortal life were mingled and intertwined with immortal protection; where souls even the most neglected and the most solitary found a world of interest and consolation exempt from all mundane disappointments. Men thus exercised themselves in loving, in this world those whom they were to love in the other; they calculated on finding beyond the grave the holy protectors of their infancy, the sweet friends of their childhood, the faithful guardians of their whole existence; there was but one vast love which united the two lives of man, and which, commenced amid the storms of time, was prolonged throughout the glories of eternity.

But all that faith and all that tender affection which bound to heaven the hearts of the men of those times met and settled down on one supreme image. All these pious traditions, some local, others personal, were eclipsed and engrossed by those which the entire world told of Mary. Queen of the Earth as well as of heaven, whilst every brow and every heart bowed down before her, every mind was inspired by her glory; whilst the earth was covered with sanctuaries and cathedrals in her honor, the imagination of those poetic generations never ceased to discover some new perfection, some new charm, in the midst of that supreme beauty. Each day brought forth some more marvellous legend, some new ornament which the gratitude of the world offered to her who had reopened the gates of heaven, who had replenished the ranks of the Angels, who had indemnified man for the sin of Eve;—the humble "handmaid" crowned by God with the diadem which Michael wrested from Lucifer, when casting him into the depths of hell. "Thou must indeed hear us," said one with exquisite simplicity, "for we have so much happiness in honoring thee." "Ah!" cries Walter Von de Vogelwede, "let us ever praise that sweet Virgin to whom her Son can refuse nothing. This is our supreme consolation: in heaven she does whatever she wishes!" And full of unwavering confidence in the object of so much love, convinced of her maternal vigilance, Christendom referred to her all its troubles and all its dangers, and reposed in that confidence, according to the beautiful idea of a poet of Elizabeth's time.

In the spirit of those ages, wherein there was so great an abundance of faith and love, two rivers had inundated the world; it had not only been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, it had been also purified by the milk of Mary, by that milk which had been the nourishment of God on earth, and which reminded him of heaven; it had incessant need of both; and, in the words of a pious monk who wrote the life of Elizabeth before us: "All are entitled to enter the family of Christ, when they make a proper use of the blood of their Redeemer and their Father, and of the milk of the sacred Virgin, their mother; yes, of that adorable blood which encourages the martyrs, and soothes their torments . . . and of that virginal milk which sweetens the bitterness of our cup by appeasing the wrath of God." And again, we must say, the enthusiasm of this filial tenderness was not enough for those souls so devout towards the Virgin-Mother. They required a sentiment more tender, if possible, more familiar, more encouraging, the sweetest and the purest that man can conceive. After all, had not Mary been a mere mortal, a weak woman, acquainted with all the miseries of life, who had endured calumny, and exile, and cold, and hunger? Ah! it was more than a mother; it was a sister that Christian people loved and cherished in her! Hence she was constantly implored to remember that fraternity so glorious for the exiled race; hence, too, a great Saint, the most ardent of her votaries, hesitated not to invoke her thus: "O Mary," said he, "we beseech thee, as Abraham besought Sara in the land of Egypt. . . . O Mary!—O our Sara! say that thou art our sister, so that for thy sake, God may look favorably on us, and that, through thee, our souls may live in God! Say it, then, O our beloved Sara! say that thou art our sister, and because of our having such a sister, the Egyptians—that is to say, the devils—will be afraid of us; because of such a sister, the angels will