

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

## **Introduction**

In his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI invites Catholics and all Christians to reflect on the nature and practice of love. Christian love, he explains, is not an abstract ideal but the response to the divine love made manifest in creation and throughout salvation history. In the words of Scripture, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). The “we” in this affirmation is ecclesial; it is the Church which is constituted as a community of love, and by its works of charity the Church makes the Trinitarian love manifest. In other words, the Church is loved into being and it is sustained by love. Since love lies at the very core of the Church’s existence, the practice of charity is the responsibility of all Christians and of the Church as a whole. Works of mercy, to use the Methodist phrase, cannot be outsourced to secular institutions.

The Church’s service of love does have an institutional aspect that mirrors that of its secular counterparts. For the sake of its mission, the Church configures its charitable activities in an organized, orderly fashion. However, where the Church’s unique contribution lies is not chiefly at the programmatic level but at the personal. The Church does not simply provide structures for charitable activities, but persons. The persons the Church provides are people who have both professional competence and also a “formation of the heart” so that they will carry out their activities with a wisdom that transcends the bounds of human prudence and philanthropy. In short, what the Church

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

primarily offers the world is not an idea or a structure or a program, but saints. The saints “stand out as lasting models of social charity for people of good will”.<sup>1</sup>

The message of *Deus caritas* is clear on this point: sanctity has social significance. It is against the backdrop of this aspect of Benedict’s first encyclical that I formulate the central claim of this paper: A church without saints forgets how to serve.<sup>2</sup> Faced with the enormity of the problems of this present age, a church without saints easily falls prey to presumption (the right ideology or technology can fix everything) or despair (all love’s labors are lost). A church without saints easily forgets that “time devoted to God in prayer not only does not detract from effective and loving service to neighbor but is in fact the inexhaustible source of that service”.<sup>3</sup> A church without saints easily overlooks the fact that: “Those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them”.<sup>4</sup>

The saints are not static, saccharine portraits of perfection but living icons of the Church’s ministry of reconciliation. There is in the saints no opposition between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, love of God or love of neighbor, evangelism or mission.

Whether active in contemplation, contemplative in action, or active out of the fullness of

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<sup>1</sup> *Deus Caritas*, 40

<sup>2</sup> The words in this statement are inspired by the lyrics of Fred Pratt Green’s hymn “Rejoice in God’s saints” (UMH#708) where the phrase “a world without saints forgets how to praise” occurs twice.

<sup>3</sup> *Deus Caritas*, 36

<sup>4</sup> *Deus Caritas*, 42.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

contemplation, the saint is always ready “to serve the present age”<sup>5</sup> because she already embodies the coming kingdom.

In this paper, I wish to consider instead how these statements on the social significance of sanctity are made concrete by remembering concrete exemplars of these claims. To be specific, I wish to consider how John Wesley’s remembrance of the life of Gregorio López, a Mexican Catholic mystic as an exemplar of Christian perfection, is a practice rich in ecclesial and social significance. In order to place Wesley’s practice of naming Christian exemplars in context, I will begin this paper by briefly sketching the contours of his doctrine of Christian perfection before examining how Wesley recognized and promoted the particular example of López. After this examination of Wesleyan hagiography, we will consider the difficulties that such a practice faces in a society such as ours where cynicism is seen as a virtue. Finally, I will ask for help from the common doctor, Thomas Aquinas, for conceptual clarity on the key distinction between first and second perfection in order to show that the pattern of holiness that Wesley discerned in López is of abiding social significance.

### **Perfection and the grammar of holiness**

Let us begin by observing the main contours of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection.

The basic law of Christian existence is that sin and grace are in a relation of inverse proportion; where grace abounds sin does not. For Wesley, *simul justus et peccator*

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper I will allude to the lyrics of Charles Wesley’s hymn “A Charge to Keep I have” (UMH#413).

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

might be the common experience of babes and youths in Christ, but those who have the mind of Christ and walked as he walked leave behind the contradictions of flesh and spirit in order to become perfect Christians.<sup>6</sup> Perfection might be rare, but it is the normal outcome of walking in the way of salvation.<sup>7</sup>

For Wesley, perfection is possible in this life because God does not command the impossible, and He says “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mat 5:48).

Indeed, perfection in this life is imperative because without holiness no one shall see the Lord (Cf. Heb 12:14). The perfection that is possible in this life is not divine perfection, nor is it angelic perfection, nor is it Adamic perfection.<sup>8</sup> The perfection that is possible and imperative in this life is Christian perfection. This perfection has a negative aspect, freedom from inbred sin, and a positive one, perfect love.

Christian perfection is not a pelagian fantasy; it is not attained through the sheer exercise of heroic virtue but through participation in Christ’s virtues in union with Christ’s body. Outside the Church no Christian perfection is possible. The Church is the primary community and the foundation for the way of perfection. Only in the Church is the grace of God mediated to us in an orderly and dependable way through the means of grace, the Eucharist being the chief of these. However, holiness is more easily attained by living in intentional communities where we are watched over in love as we seek to devote our life to the keeping of the great commandment to love God and neighbor. The Methodist

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<sup>6</sup> WJW (Works of John Wesley, Bicentennial Edition) 2:121, “Christian Perfection”.

<sup>7</sup> WJW 2:105, “Christian Perfection”.

<sup>8</sup> WJW 3:72-73, “On Perfection”.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

societies and bands are so many schools of perfection where Christians learn to go on to perfection not only for the sake of their own sake but for the sake of the world.

In sum, Christian perfection is a sign that God’s grace can truly transform created reality here below. It is a sign that God can write straight on crooked lines, as the old saying goes. For this reason, the public recognition of those who attain Christian perfection reverberates within the walls of the Church and beyond. The witnesses of entire sanctification stir the believer to greater acts of faith and love; these same witnesses also disturb the sleep of those who had forgotten that to be only human is not to be a little higher than a chimp, but rather a little lower than the angels. In outline, this is Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection.

Historically, Wesley’s doctrine of perfection played a powerful role in shaping the criteria which were applied to the recognition and remembrance of holiness. The legacy of this practice was not all positive. An exaggerated understanding of the significance of second blessings and an over-reliance on personal testimony led to what John Peters calls an “abbreviated Wesleyanism”<sup>9</sup> that downplayed the role of the sacraments in sanctification, thereby completely misunderstanding John Wesley’s theology of grace. The unhappy experiences of “self-canonization” during the revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made many Methodists give up on any ecclesial recognition of sanctity.

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<sup>9</sup> John L. Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), p.193.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

The uncertain Methodism that shies from naming the names of the perfect is far removed from the spirit of its founder. John Wesley was not afraid of singling out examples and exemplars of the doctrine of Christian perfection. Indeed, the Methodist movement as we know it would be unthinkable without such witness to entire sanctification. I want us to consider one such witness: Gregorio López.

### **Wesley and Gregorio López**

Gregorio López was born in Madrid on July 4, 1542. Very little is known about his family origins or his time in Spain; his biographers and critics have speculated that he was a secret-Jew, or a Lutheran, or an “*iluminado*”, or even the son of Philip II.<sup>10</sup> What is known is that around the age of twenty, Gregorio set out for the New World and established a hermitage in New Spain at Atemajac. It is important to note that, at that time, Spain was not a hospitable place for those seeking a life of solitude. Fears of Lutheranism and solifidianism cast a shadow over any kind of life that favored interior devotion over external observance. By the end of the sixteenth century, New Spain became a refuge for those escaping the persecution of the *alumbrados* in the old world. However, by his own testimony, Gregorio traveled to México not to escape the supervision of the Church, but in obedience to the command of Christ whose voice he heard while visiting the shrine of Guadalupe in Extremadura.

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<sup>10</sup> Antonio Rubial García, *La santidad controvertida: Hagiografía y conciencia criolla alrededor de los venerables no canonizados de Nueva España* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999), p.96.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

Gregorio López is known to have written several books, his most famous being an exposition on the Book of Revelation (*Comentario al Apocalipsis*) and a practical medical guide (*Tesoro de Medicinas*). However, it was not for these writings that he was most famous but for the splendor of his interior life which shone through his spiritual exercises and counsels. One of the beneficiaries of this spiritual direction was Father Francisco Losa who became his constant companion and biographer. By the time of his death in 1596, Gregorio had gained a reputation for sanctity to which Losa's biography of his life, *Vida que el siervo de Dios Gregorio López hizo en algunos lugares de Nueva España*, written two years after Lopez's death, contributed in no small measure.

Losa's biography of López is intentionally hagiographical. It is roughly divided into two parts. The first part is an account of the life of Gregorio López cast in the same mold as Saint Athanasius's *Life of Anthony*. Like St. Anthony the Great, Gregorio's life in the desert is spent in spiritual combat. Again and again, the devil attacks Gregorio, sometimes by tempting him spiritually, at times by assaulting him physically, but López proves the victor in these contests thanks to his practice of prayer and mortification. Like St. Anthony, Gregorio does not experience absolute solitude in the desert; whether out of curiosity or devotion, many fly into the wilderness to meet him. Eventually, Gregorio discovers that the true desert is found within and he is thus able to take the desert with him as he travels through many towns in México dispensing spiritual advice to those willing to hear it. Such is the first part of Losa's hagiography.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

The second, and much more extensive, part of Losa’s account considers the virtues of Gregorio. In addition to discussing Gregorio’s humility, patience, and inward poverty, Losa spends most of his time discussing two things. First, the extent of Gregorio’s knowledge (a knowledge that was not acquired from learning but through infused contemplation), and second, his practice of continuous prayer to which Losa dedicates six entire chapters.

Losa’s account of López’s life went through numerous editions and translations. The reasons for the popularity of this hermit’s story are not surprising. On the one hand, biblical commentaries, especially those on the Apocalypse, were popular at that the time (they still are). Lopez’s writing of a commentary on this book from the vantage point of an apocalyptic event, the discovery of the New World, was bound to be noticed. On the other hand, mystic literature was also on the ascendancy, and here comes a mystic who is writing not from an interior castle, but from a wilderness not unlike that encountered by the founders of the hermitical life in Egypt. Indeed the mystical experiences of López are so highly valued that Miguel de Molinos rhapsodizes of Gregorio as an incarnate seraphim and a deified man.<sup>11</sup> In any case, by the end of the seventeenth century, Losa’s *Vida* has gone through several French editions and an English edition translated by Abraham Woodhead which John Wesley read, abridged, and serialized.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rubial, p.110.

<sup>12</sup>WJW 19:294, n.73. Cf. Jean Orcibal. "Les spirituels français et espagnols chez John Wesley et ses contemporains" in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* CXXXIX (1951): 50-109.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

By Wesley’s own account, we know that from October 28, 1735 to December 14, 1735 he spent a significant amount of time reading *Losa’s* biography. Given Wesley’s intelligence and the relative brevity of this book it is not hard to suppose that he either read *Losa* over and over again, or that he read it very, very carefully. Whatever the case, we do know from Wesley’s diary that after laying the book aside for some years he re-read it on August 31, 1742.

It is not hard to imagine the reasons for Wesley’s attraction to this text. Though he does not explicitly say so, Wesley was surely drawn to read López the first time out of a perceived affinity between Lopez’ journey to New Spain and his own journey to Savannah; both coming to a new world, both living among a new people, both seeking to establish primitive Christianity in their own way. However, what most attracted Wesley to Lopez and what led him back to that foreign mystic were two things: Lopez’s practice of self-denial, and his experience of an uninterrupted communion with God.

From Wesley’s journal entries and letters, it is clear that Wesley considered López to be an exemplar of Christian perfection. López lived in constant awareness of God’s love, for him “all is midday now”.<sup>13</sup> According to *Losa*, López credited the source of this communion to his participation in the Eucharist and to the indwelling of the Holy

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<sup>13</sup> WW (Works of Wesley, Jackson Edition) 12:294, “To a Member of the Society”. This statement is a paraphrase from his own abridgment of *Losa’s* account of Lopez’s death: “[W]hen, being asked, if he would have the holy candle to go see the secret, he answered with great courage, as is said before, *All is clear, there is no secret, it is noon-day with me*. Wherein his meaning was not, that his faith was without obscurity, but that, in matters belonging to it, he had no doubt”. Woodhead, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.95. Compare this statement with Wesley’s abridgment, “[W]hen it appeared to me time to give him the parting blessing, I said, ‘All is clear; there is no longer anything hid: It is full noon with me.’ Plainly declaring, that the light which then shone on his soul, far surpassed that of the noon-day sun” (404).

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

Trinity.<sup>14</sup> Wesley was convinced that this abiding sense of the presence of God was the perfection to which all Methodists are to aspire. For this reason, when speaking to a young member of the Methodist societies, Wesley encourages the young man to seek “an open intercourse with God, such a close, uninterrupted communion with him, as G. Lopez experienced”.<sup>15</sup> On another occasion, bemoaning the worldliness of those Methodists whose *contemptus mundi* was compatible with a life of luxury, Wesley sarcastically wonders: “And this they call ‘retiring from the world’! What would Gregory Lopez have called it?”<sup>16</sup>

At times Wesley despairs of actually finding some living witnesses of the holiness that Gregorio López exemplified. When he does find such persons, as in the case of John Fletcher, then the highest tribute Wesley can speak of such a person is that his holiness is in no way inferior to that of Gregory López.<sup>17</sup> Fletcher experienced “as deep communion with God, and as high a measure of inward holiness” as Lopez, and “his outward holiness shone before men with full as bright a luster” as the Spanish mystic’s did.<sup>18</sup>

As an exemplar of Christian perfection, Gregorio López’s holiness shows us how high a degree of perfection is attainable in this life. Thus, when Wesley criticizes Swedenborg’s account of heaven; Wesley complains that “his account of it has a natural tendency to

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<sup>14</sup> Wesley, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.397, Cf. Woodhead, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.200.

<sup>15</sup> WW 12:44, “To a young disciple”.

<sup>16</sup> WJW 21:32, Journal 10, October 15, 1755.

<sup>17</sup> WJW 3:627, “On the death of John Fletcher”.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

sink our conceptions both of the glory of heaven and of the inhabitants of it, whom he describes as far inferior in holiness and happiness to Gregory Lopez”.<sup>19</sup>

It might sound banal to modern ears, but even in his poverty, Gregorio was a truly happy man. His happiness was the fruit of that perfect love which he practiced toward God and neighbor, and this happiness was also a consequence of his apparent unawareness of personal sin. When Losa asks López whether sinless perfection is possible in this life, Lopez replied,

When those whom God has enabled to love him with all their soul, do with his assistance all that is in their power, and that with deep humility, it is possible for them to remain without committing sin; as clearly appears, in that our Lord, who commanded nothing which was impossible to be performed, commanded this, *Thou shall love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, mind, soul, and strength.* But he who does this, not only does not sin, but grows daily in all holiness.<sup>20</sup>

To this assertion Losa replied,

But how can this be, when the Scripture says, *The just man sins seven times a day?*<sup>21</sup>

López’ in turn explained to Losa that Christians cannot take this text as literally applying to them. However, Wesley does not think that this explanation sufficiently addresses the question and so he adds the following note.

Observe what kind of perfection the papists hold! The true answer is, there is no such word in the Bible. Solomon’s words are, the just man falleth seven times; not into sin, but trouble.<sup>22</sup>

Readers of Wesley know that Proverbs 24:16 was a frequent proof text used by critics of the doctrine of Christian perfection. Be that as it may, it is certainly the case that López’s

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<sup>19</sup> WJW 22:127, Journal 18, April 22, 1779.

<sup>20</sup> Wesley, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.396.

<sup>21</sup> Wesley, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.396.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.396.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

lack of awareness of personal sin troubled his biographer and hindered his cause for canonization. Indeed, in order to safeguard both Catholic doctrine and Lopez’ sanctity, Losa limited such claims of “sinlessness” to refer to mortal sin, or dismissed them as lapses of memory.<sup>23</sup>

For Wesley, not only was López an exemplar of Christian perfection but also of the universality of the gospel. The life of López is a sign that Christian holiness is not limited by denominational boundaries. As Wesley explains,

Persons may be quite right in their opinions, and yet have no religion at all; and, on the other hand, persons may be truly religious, who hold many wrong opinions. Can any one possibly doubt of this, while there are Romanists in the world? For who can deny, not only that many of them formerly have been truly religious, as Thomas à Kempis, Gregory Lopez, and the Marquis de Renty; but that many of them even at this day, are real inward Christians? And yet what a heap of erroneous opinions do they hold, delivered by tradition from their fathers!<sup>24</sup>

In short, Wesley’s recognition of López’s sanctity is a remarkable witness to that catholicity of Spirit which Wesley preached about and sometimes practiced.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, without much exaggeration, one could say that such Protestant recognition of holiness

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<sup>23</sup> See for instance the exchange that takes place when the Losa asks López about any sins that the latter needs absolution for: “Whereto [Lopez] answered, that, *Through the mercy of God, he found nothing that troubled his conscience.* Which is to be understood in the matter of mortal sin: for, he was not ignorant that none ever lived without venial sins, except the Virgin Mary our Blessed Lady; not for that he never committed any; but because having committed none wittingly, and being asked on the sudden, it was very possible that that time he remembered none” (Woodhead, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.60).

<sup>24</sup> WJW 2:375, “On the Trinity”.

<sup>25</sup> John Wesley’s ecumenical openness in his sermon *On the Catholic Spirit* and his *Letter to a Roman Catholic* is remarkable given the period in which he lived but they represent only one strand of Wesley’s attitude toward the Roman Catholic Church. Regarding this letter, which has been called an olive branch to the Catholics, David Chapman [*In Search of the Catholic Spirit: Methodists and Roman Catholics in Dialogue*, (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2004)] rightly cautions us that “it would be misleading to place too much weight on a single letter, written when there was considerable pressure on Wesley to avoid further trouble. Certainly, the letter reveals Wesley at his most irenic and conciliatory though it is unique in tone and content among his writings on Roman Catholicism. There is little evidence in subsequent works to show that Wesley made any attempt to fulfill its noble resolutions” (33).

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

among Catholics was particularly Wesleyan.<sup>26</sup> However, Wesley’s reception of López is not uncritical.

First, Wesley is critical of López’s biographer “of which Gregory himself was in no wise worthy”.<sup>27</sup> In particular, Wesley complains that Losa “ascribed all [Lopez’s] virtues to the merits and mediation of the Queen of Heaven.”<sup>28</sup> However, the larger issue is Wesley’s suspicion of Catholic hagiography in general.

To state it bluntly, Wesley considered Catholic hagiographers as uninformed and untrustworthy. They are uninformed because they rely on hearsay or gossip to stitch together a portrait of a person that they did not know.<sup>29</sup> They are untrustworthy because they so misunderstand the nature of sanctity that they crowd the saint’s life with all sorts of miracles in order to confirm their subjects’ holiness, rather than focusing exclusively on their virtuous life in Christ. Indeed, a survey of Wesley’s abridgment of Losa’s

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<sup>26</sup> This recognition would give rise to confusions and condemnations among his contemporaries. As Chapman avers, “Such obvious sympathy for certain Roman Catholic spiritual writers and their interpretation of Christian life distinguished Wesley from the majority of his contemporaries in the Church of England, who were far more Protestant-minded, and inevitably invited the accusation of popery” (Op.Cit., 22).

<sup>27</sup> WJW 19:294, Journal 5, August 31, 1742.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, in comparing the holiness of the recently deceased John Fletcher to that of López and de Renty, Wesley states, “There are two circumstances that deserve consideration. One is, we are not assured that the writers of their lives did not extenuate, if not suppress, what was amiss in them; and some things amiss we are assured there were, viz., many touches of superstition, and some of idolatry, in worshipping saints, the Virgin Mary in particular: But I have not suppressed or extenuated anything in Mr. Fletcher’s character; for, indeed, I knew nothing that was amiss, nothing that needed to be extenuated, much less suppressed. A second circumstance is, that the writers of their lives could not have so full a knowledge of them, as both Mrs. Fletcher and I had of Mr. Fletcher; being eye and ear witnesses of his whole conduct. Consequently, we know that his life was not sullied with any mixture of either idolatry or superstition” (WJW 19:294, Journal 5, August 31, 1742). As an aside, I must say that though this attribution of Lopez holiness to the mediation of Mary is in character for Losa, I have not been able to track down the place where Losa actually said this in so many words. However, Losa (in the Woodhead translation) does call Mary the “Star of the Sea” in the spiritual journey (101f), and Lopez recommends though he himself does not use the Rosary as a valuable aid in the pursuit of perfection (101, 183f).

<sup>29</sup> WJW 3:627, “On the death of John Fletcher”.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

account shows that Wesley systematically omits mention of post-mortem miracles by López. These miracles proved an important part of Losa’s text as they served to underscore the true holiness of the servant of God. However, instead of focusing on the saint as a thaumaturge, Wesley highlights his personal virtues as being the true signs of his holiness.

In trimming the miracles from Losa’s account of Lopez’ life Wesley discards what he considers to be unnecessary and potentially confusing evidence. After all, people are called holy because they are virtuous not because they are workers of wonders. The abundance of these signs in someone’s life might be a cause for admiration, not imitation. In other words, for Wesley, López’ sanctity is made known through the miracle of his life not the miracles of his relics.

Second, Wesley is critical of certain aspects of López’s life. For him, Gregorio is “that good and wise (though much mistaken) man”.<sup>30</sup> López was after all a Catholic, hence some of his beliefs and practices were of necessity not Scriptural. However, it was not López’s Marian devotion that most unsettled Wesley but his practice of solitude.

Wesley’s abridgment of Losa’s text, though lacking extensive editorial comments, contains several footnotes decrying Gregorio’s longing for eremitical life. For example, regarding López’s desire to spend his days serving God in a hermitage, Wesley observes:

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<sup>30</sup> WJW 19:294, Journal 5, August 31, 1742.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

It is absolutely certain that this resolution is not to be justified on Scripture-Principles; and consequently, Lopez is not to be imitated in this; however God might wink at the times of ignorance.<sup>31</sup>

Time and again, Wesley makes it clear that God’s way does not lead through the desert, and that if López is assaulted by tribulations while in the desert it is precisely because he has strayed from God’s path.<sup>32</sup> As Wesley writes in a letter to Miss Loxdale, “I do not wonder at the horrid temptations of Gregory Lopez, because he was in a desert, that is, so far out of God’s way”.<sup>33</sup>

If Wesley is sharply critical of López’s flight *to* the desert, he is deeply appreciative of López’s flight *from* the desert. Indeed, Wesley appears to read the life of López precisely as an evangelical conversion story beginning in the unfaithful wanderings of the desert and ending in faithful discipleship in the city. Wesley is particularly fond of López’s exhortation to his biographer to go be a hermit in Mexico City!<sup>34</sup> True perfection could not be attained in the solitude of the hermitage but only in the bustle of the city. Losa heeded this advice and in his own words.

Losa returned thither, and his whole manner of life was entirely changed. Whenever he went thro’ the city, whether to collect or distributed charity, he felt an inward recollection and prayer, which not all the noise and hurry of the city could interrupt, as if he had been fifty years in that holy exercise.<sup>35</sup>

It is worthy of note that at this point in the narrative, Wesley’s account of this episode corresponds very closely to the original with little in the way of abridgment or alteration.

The point that Wesley wants to make (the lesson that he thought López learned from his

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<sup>31</sup> Wesley, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.342.

<sup>32</sup> *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.343, 345, 367.

<sup>33</sup> WW 13:132, “To Miss Loxdale”.

<sup>34</sup> WW 12:305, “To a Member of the Society”.

<sup>35</sup> Wesley, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.377.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

time in the wilderness) is that there is no wisdom to be found in the desert; communion with God is helped, not hindered, by living in communion with others. López sums up this insight in a simple testimony, “I find God alike in little things and in great”.<sup>36</sup> For this reason, “No created thing was capable of either interrupting or abating his continual love of God and his neighbor”.<sup>37</sup> One might say that López was active out of the fullness of contemplation (to use the Thomistic phrase) for he “employed himself wholly in contemplation, in order to confirm himself still more in the love of God and of his neighbor”.<sup>38</sup>

For Wesley, as for López, contemplation is Christian when oriented toward action, but action is only fruitful when born from contemplation, and it is in this correlation of action and contemplation that his holiness is made manifest in a “continual act of love”.<sup>39</sup> It is in the practice of perfect love in the city, and not in the raptures or revelations of the desert, that the summit of perfection is reached.<sup>40</sup>

### **Holiness in service of the present age**

A casual reader of hagiographical accounts such as that of Gregorio López might be forgiven if she comes away with the impression that all the saints are alike. If John Fletcher, Jane Cooper and Gregorio López are all exemplars of Christian perfection, then

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<sup>36</sup> Wesley, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.373.

<sup>37</sup> Wesley, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.392.

<sup>38</sup> Wesley, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.359.

<sup>39</sup> Wesley, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.393. Elsewhere we read, “That presence of God wherein he lived was not barren or unfruitful: seeing it daily produced more and more acts of love to God and his neighbor: that love which is the end of the commandment, and the sum of all perfection” (Wesley, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.366).

<sup>40</sup> Woodhead, *The Life of Mr. Gregory Lopez*, p.196.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

they must bear a certain family resemblance. However, perfect love can be made manifest in dazzlingly diverse circumstances. There are real differences among the saints, differences in grace and differences in mission. For instance, Elizabeth Harper was, by Wesley’s own account, “a real witness of Christian perfection, but only in a low degree”.<sup>41</sup> Each saint is unique.

The process of singling out certain individuals for special recognition does not mean that these are the only saints. For Methodists as for Catholics, one can never say that there are too many saints in the Church. As Joseph Ratzinger once averred: “Saint Paul told us unequivocally that we are called to holiness: “This is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess 4:13). Because of this, the number of saints is, thanks to God, incomparably greater than the group of individuals given prominence through canonization”.<sup>42</sup> The question for the Church is, according to Ratzinger, “whether the standards generally in effect until now ought not to be made more complete today by means of new emphases, in order to place before the eyes of Christendom those figures who, more than anyone else, make the Holy Church visible to us, in the midst of so many doubts about her holiness”.<sup>43</sup>

What pattern of holiness is in the greatest need of recognition today? In *The Meaning of Saints*, Lawrence Cunningham makes a strong case for the recognition of a unique form

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<sup>41</sup> WW 14:262. In a journal entry on September 1, 1790, Wesley places Elizabeth Harper in a similar light to Jane Cooper, and yet in the preface of the extract that he published of Harper’s life Wesley makes it clear that Harper’s perfection though genuine was of a low degree.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, as cited in W.H. Woestman, *Canonization: Theology, History, Process*, (Ottawa: Saint Paul University, 2002), p.xv.

<sup>43</sup> Ratzinger, Op. Cit., p.xvi.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

of sanctity especially suited to serve the present age.<sup>44</sup> Yes, there are always those perennial saintly personalities, like Padre Pio the Italian miracle worker, whose appeal is not lessened by the fact that their way of life appears to be untouched by modern influences.<sup>45</sup> But, our time calls for a new pattern of holiness, a hidden sanctity that can penetrate through the indifference and hostility of modern society toward religion in order to transform the world from within.

According to Cunningham, when God disappears from view behind extreme forms of oppression, “it is the saint who makes God appear”.<sup>46</sup> This viewpoint is shared and sharpened by Teresa Sanders who states,

In this time of frost, when God-language is under interrogation and the future of theology itself is uncertain, saints may function as minor suns, stand-ins for a God whose meaning, not to mention presence is unclear”.<sup>47</sup>

Note well in this case, contra Cunningham, the saint does not actually bring God closer, rather the saint “is the one who experiences most keenly the absence of God”.<sup>48</sup> The saints only become visible when God becomes eclipsed. Sanctity shines through tragedy.

The conjunction of tragedy and sanctity is clear not only in the work of Sanders but also in that of Wyschogrod.<sup>49</sup> For her, there are two patterns of holiness: the contemplative and the compassionate. Yet the more relevant of the two is the second. The saint is the

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<sup>44</sup> Lawrence S. Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980).

<sup>45</sup> Cunningham, p.86.

<sup>46</sup> Cunningham, p.95.

<sup>47</sup> Teresa Sanders, “Seeking a Minor Sun: Saints after the death of God” in *Horizons* 22.02, p.184.

<sup>48</sup> Sanders, p.184.

<sup>49</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, “Exemplary Individuals: Toward a Phenomenological Ethics” in *Philosophy and Theology*, Vol.1, No.1, 1986, pp.9-32. In this connection, Wyschogrod mentions the case of a prostitute whose claim to sanctity is based on the fact that she gave herself freely to men of all castes (p.19).

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

one “whose adult life in its entirety is devoted to the alleviation of sorrow”.<sup>50</sup> Such a person is not the product of a particular community or school of perfection, but a kind of moral idiot savant who “apprehends in a direct and immediate fashion...the trace of transcendence in the other”.<sup>51</sup>

Hidden, secular, sorrowful; these are the attributes of the modern saint. This pattern of holiness is not found primarily in the official canons of the Church but in works of contemporary fiction: Albert Camus’s doctor in *The Plague*, the whiskey priest in Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*, the unnamed curé in George Bernanos’ *Diary of a Country Priest*. These figures help us discern a pattern of holiness that is typically modern. As Cunningham explains, in our time, “sanctity reveals itself as a surprise, a surprise either at the kind of person who shows us a saintly life or surprise at where that person comes from”.<sup>52</sup> These literary figures are admittedly fictional, but then there is much in hagiography that is fictional. In any case, a “hagiographer” (real or literary) can “create characters so real and compelling that they can offer clear lessons in the way we should or could live our lives”.<sup>53</sup>

These accounts of tragic sanctity are not without appeal. However, they are deficient on several counts. First of all, they are insufficiently attentive to the ways in which the

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<sup>50</sup> Wyschogrod, p.17.

<sup>51</sup> Wyschogrod, p.21.

<sup>52</sup> Cunningham, p.113.

<sup>53</sup> Cunningham, p.161.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

modern moral framework presupposes practice inimical to the recognition of sanctity.<sup>54</sup>

In the words of David Matzko, modernity “requires an account of morality which does not depend upon local exemplars but reaches beyond the limits of local practice and tradition altogether”.<sup>55</sup> Second, in their indifference to the distinction between history and fiction, the significance of the saints is limited to the inspirational realm. In such a realm, the saints are void of any properly theological significance; they do not confirm any doctrine nor bring any new perspectives on Christian life, far less do they have any liturgical significance; they do not remember to pray for us. Only the hardest of hearts could fail to be moved by the pattern of holiness illustrated by Father Zosimas. Only the hardest of heads would consider offering a prayer to a fictional Father Zosimas.

### **The common doctor and the treatment for tragedy**

If the tragic pattern of sanctity is not the moral panacea hoped for by postmodern theologians, then where should one turn to find relief from the contradictions of contemporary existence? The cure for the modern malaise which Cunningham, Sanders and Wyschogrod diagnose is not found in discerning or designing a new pattern of holiness, but in remembering an old one. Granted, the pattern of holiness embodied by Gregorio is now considered passé. He was single; he was a contemplative; he was physically frail and psychologically simple. All these characteristics stand in marked

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. David M. Matzko, “Postmodernism. Saints and Scoundrels” in *Modern Theology*, 9:1 January 1993, pp.19-36.

<sup>55</sup> Matzko, p.22. Matzko believes that the postmodern critique of modernity, particularly its opposition to universal notions of rationality and morality, opens the space for the reappropriation of the saints as moral exemplars. Yet, the postmodern allergy to metanarratives seems to me to restrict the significance of the saints to the historical realm and leave little room for the possibility that the ministry of the saints begins in earnest after they die.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

contrast to an age that admires the active life, the physically powerful and the psychologically “complex”. Many find a tragic hero more noble and inspiring than a simple saint. Yet, as G.K. Chesterton observes, “it is the paradox of history that each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it the most”.<sup>56</sup> Gregorio López and others like him may be the antidotes to the poisons of modernity and postmodernity which inject cynical question marks into all witnesses of holiness or perfection.

In order to substantiate the claim that López’s pattern of perfection is very much in need in recognition, I want us to briefly consider Thomas Aquinas’s distinction between first perfection and second perfection. The purpose of turning to the common doctor at this point in our reflections is not to engage in a full comparison of the Thomistic and Wesleyan doctrines of perfection, such an engagement would far exceed the scope of this paper. Rather, I turn to this particular Thomistic distinction in order to elucidate what Wesley believed but did not make conceptually explicit: there are different kinds of perfection.

According to Thomas, perfection is twofold.<sup>57</sup> The first perfection is the perfection of form. The second perfection is the perfection of operation. In the first perfection, God gives creatures their being. In the second perfection, God directs creatures to their proper end. That a whale has fins instead of wings pertains to its first perfection. That this same whale actually uses its fins to swim rather than to crawl pertains to its second perfection.

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<sup>56</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*, (New York, New York: Doubleday, 1956), p.24.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Aquinas, ST (*Summa Theologiae*) 1.73.1; De Veritate 1.10.ad.s.c.3.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

In the case of human beings, it pertains to their first perfection to be made after the image of God. As intellectual creatures capable of knowing and loving God, humans are perfect according to the perfection of form.<sup>58</sup> By way of operation (*per operationem*), by actually knowing and loving, humans attain their second perfection which consists in union with God (*unio sanctorum ad Deum [est] per cognitionem et amorem*).<sup>59</sup>

These two perfections, as is already probably evident, are closely related. The first perfection is the cause of the second perfection “because the form is the principle of operation”.<sup>60</sup> However, the second perfection is the reason why the first perfection was given to begin with.<sup>61</sup>

According to Thomas, the first stage of human operation originates from loving contemplation of another being’s first perfection. Before I will any goods to a friend, before I seek companionship with another (*amor concupiscentia*), I am simply glad that this person exists. This first operation is indeed a fitting end for human action; a person’s active receptivity to the created good is a perfect human act.<sup>62</sup> Contemplation of

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<sup>58</sup> Note well, this first perfection cannot be lost for the image of God is present virtually in the habits and even in the powers of the soul, in the same way that the act is present in its principles. So as long as at least the powers of the soul are present, the image of God persists even without actual acts (Cf. ST 1.93.8.a3).

<sup>59</sup> ST 3.2.10.

<sup>60</sup> Note well, what Aquinas is not saying. He is not saying that the first perfection is static and the second dynamic, nor is he saying that the first perfection is pure essence and the second pure act. A form as such is an act (Cf. ST 1.73). For this reason, perfection is constituted by two distinct but inseparable acts; the first perfection by the *actus essendi*, the second perfection by *operatio*. In other words, both the first perfection and the second are dynamic acts.

<sup>61</sup> ST 1.75.5.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Michael Sherwin’s excellent book, *By Knowledge and By Love: Charity and Knowledge in the Moral Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005). The

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

this created good (first perfection) can impel a person to form an intention to attain this good; deliberate over the means to do so, and then command the will to make use of the necessary powers to act for that end (second perfection). In short, both the first and the second perfection are perfectible.

With these Thomistic distinctions in mind, let us return to Cunningham et al. It turns out that the sanctity that these theologians prescribe is not heroic but anti-heroic. Like the characters in Camus's *The Plague*, these theologians talk about saints, but what really interests them is being human.<sup>63</sup> In the language of Aquinas, what interests them is not the second perfection of the human but the first perfection.

Take Wyschogrod's description of the saint as one who is especially sensitive to the transcendence of the other. Is not this sensitivity similar to the receptivity to the goodness of creation that is the natural basis for all human action? Or consider Cunningham's search for holiness in the humdrum rhythms of modern life. Is not this longing for the canonization of the quotidian satisfied by insisting that every human life is perfect simply by virtue of existing? Indeed, one might say that part of the genius of people like Dostoevsky lies in the fact that they are able to make manifest through fiction what is true though hidden in reality; that every human being by virtue of being

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primary purpose of Sherwin's study is to show how Aquinas' understanding of the primacy of the intellect at the level of specification and the primacy of the will at the level of exercise overcome the weaknesses of theologies of moral motivation.

<sup>63</sup> Consider the following exchange between Tarrou and Rieux in Albert Camus, *La Peste*, (Saint-Amand: Editions Gallimard, 1947), p.230. Tarrou: « En somme, ...ce qui m'intéresse, c'est de savoir comment on devient un saint. » Rieux: « Mais vous ne croyez pas en Dieu. » Tarrou: « Justement. Peut-on être un saint sans Dieu, c'est le seul problème concret que je connaisse aujourd'hui. » Rieux: « Je n'ai pas de goût, je crois, pour l'héroïsme et la sainteté. Ce qui m'intéresse, c'est d'être un homme. » Tarrou: « Oui nous cherchons la même chose, mais je suis moins ambitieux. »

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

human bears the noble title, person. Finally, take Sander’s suggestion that the saints make God appear in places where he might not otherwise be evident. Is not this affirmation confirmed in the doctrine of the image of God, the image which is the basis of the first perfection of the human?

In short, what unites these disparate theologians together is not their interest in saints but in the sanctity of humanity. Such an affirmation is important. However, where they err is in thinking that the heroic sanctity of the second perfection is opposed to the universal dignity of the first. To strive for sanctity is not less ambitious a goal than being human, but rather it is the fulfillment of what being human is all about. In other words, the most compelling apology for the dignity of all human existence is the saint.

## **Conclusion**

Every year at annual conferences throughout the world Methodist bishops ask aspiring members for full connection the following question: “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?” Posing this question presupposes that Methodism as a whole is a viable way for someone to go on to perfection, but this supposition begs the question: where are they? Who are the ones who have said “yes” and gone on to perfection? To ask a different but related question, can a Methodism that is unwilling or unable to recognize exemplars of entire sanctification truly claim “to spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land”? In this paper, I have suggested that the answer to this question is “No” and that unless we Methodists are willing to recognize and remember the names of those who have attained perfection, we have betrayed our trust.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

By recognizing and remembering persons like López, exemplars of the second perfection, the first perfection comes into clearer view. Paradoxically, one of the problems with tragic accounts of Christianity is that they are not dramatic enough. It might be that, as Karl Jaspers states: “*Das Sein erscheint im Scheitern*”.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps, it is in suffering and failure that the glory of being, *perfectio prima*, becomes decisively manifest. However, the presence of God is decisively made manifest in the saints. It is in persons like Gregorio, that is to say, in persons who have been schooled by the Church into their second perfection, that God appears, for it is in and through the body of Christ that God is made visible to and for the world.

By recognizing and remembering persons like Gregorio, the Church is reminded that whatever wisdom the tragic holds only extends, at best, to the first perfection of the human, the perfection of being. Gregorio was not unacquainted with suffering or failure. For him, the way of perfection traversed deserts, literally and metaphorically. At times, the Oracle of Delphi’s injunction to know yourself (*gnothi seauton*) is fulfilled through the doomed struggle of the human against finitude and fate. It is indeed possible to learn through suffering, but suffering has no lessons to teach concerning the second perfection of the human. Sufferings may have played a part in the sanctification of Gregorio but perfection does not consist in suffering. In recognizing him and others like him, the

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<sup>64</sup>Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit* (München: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1947), p. 925.

“A Church without saints forgets how to serve”

Oxford Institute Paper

Edgardo Antonio Colón-Emeric

Church remembers that the noblest human act is not sorrow but joy: *fruitio est*

*nobilissimus actus patriae*.<sup>65</sup>

In the words of Saint Paul, “we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (Rom 8:22). Neither the introduction of new political programs or social initiatives will ease these pains, “for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). The whole of the universe is waiting for the second perfection of the human by grace; creation longs for saints. Hence, the recognition and remembrance of saints is an ecclesial act that has cosmic implications. If Methodists want to serve the present age, General Conferences might want to shift their attention from amending paragraphs in the Book of Discipline or adding pages to the Book of Resolutions to producing a calendar of saints. By recognizing and remembering persons like Gregorio López, Jane Cooper, and John Paul II we begin “a strict account to give”.

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<sup>65</sup> Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, 2.10.1.1.ad 3.