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Sanctity and Politics: the Canonization of St Gilbert – St Edward the Confessor

Λέξεις κλειδιά: *canonization, Gilbertine Order, pope Alexander III, pope Innocent III, Roman Church, St Edward the Confessor, St Gilbert*

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Περίληψη

Η διαδικασία αγιοποίησης (ένταξη του ονόματος ενός υποτιθέμενου «αγίου» στο Αγιολόγιο της Εκκλησίας και καθιέρωση της λατρείας του) κατά τη διάρκεια του Μεσαίωνα απασχολεί κατά κόρον τους σύγχρονους μελετητές της Μεσαιωνικής Ιστορίας. Εκτός από το ερώτημα «πώς οριζόταν η αγιότητα κατά τους Μέσους Χρόνους», ένας ακόμη λόγος που εντείνει την προσπάθεια των ειδικών να ρίξουν φως στο ζήτημα αυτό είναι οι πολιτικές-οικονομικές προεκτάσεις που ενίοτε λάμβαναν οι διαδικασίες αγιοποίησης, ιδιαίτερα μάλιστα σε μια εποχή που η δύναμη της Εκκλησίας ήταν ανυπέρβλητη. Το παρακάτω κείμενο φιλοδοξεί, μέσω της σύγκρισης της αγιοποίησης δύο πολύ δημοφιλών αγίων της Μεσαιωνικής Αγγλικής Εκκλησίας, να καταδείξει τα κριτήρια, τα κέρδη των ενδιαφερόμενων μερών, και την εξάρτηση της ανάδειξης κάποιου ως αγίου από τα πολιτικά συμφραζόμενα.

Even though only 40 years separate them, the canonization processes of Gilbert of Sempringham¹ (b. between 1083 and 1089; d. in 1189, canonized in 1201) and Edward the Confessor² (1003-1066, canonized in 1161) differ to a great extent. Edward was canonized by Alexander III, the pope who laid the foundations for the official canonization process³ [3], and Gilbert by pope Innocent III, famous for his demand for thorough evidence concerning the holiness of the suggested persons, as we will see further down. The basis of this comparative study is the events and demands that led to each canonization. One could argue that the two cases are somewhat disparate; since the only thing that connects them is that they are both English saints and they were both canonized within a few years. These exact characteristics, together with the fact that the period in which they were canonized was crucial for the evolution of papal authority, are enough to justify a comparison⁴.

The kingship of Edward the Confessor did not make it easier for him to obtain a place in the catalogue of saints of the Roman Church. The initial request for his canonization took place in the late 1130's and was unsuccessful. It was repeated 23 years later, but what made it successful this time was not the evidence collected during this period, but the political conjunctions. On the other hand, the first attempt for Gilbert's canonization was incomplete due to lack of convincing proofs. The second attempt, just after Innocent's recommendations, was considered complete enough to obtain the official recognition of his sanctity, without political reasons playing such an obvious part.

¹ For a short biography: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06557b.htm>

² For a short biography: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05322a.htm>.

³ Kemp, E.W., *Canonization and Authority in the Western Church*, Oxford, 1948. p. 100.

⁴ Frank Barlow, 'Edward [St Edward; known as Edward the Confessor] (1003x5-1066)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004
<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8516>.

Edward was not venerated as a saint during the first years after his death. His cult could be described as a creation of certain persons, their ambitions, and the political circumstances. The first attempt to have him recognized was undertaken by Osbert of Clare, the prior of Westminster, who showed a great interest in promoting his cult, by writing a *Vita* of him. With the support of King Stephen and a great part of the English clergy, he addressed the papal legate, who was in England at that time, and asked for the official recognition. The legate refused to proceed without the pope's consent (although it was allowable at the time), and advised Osbert to bring all the evidence to the pope himself. Therefore, the next step in Osbert's actions was to present the case in person to the pope, in Rome. The argument of some scholars that this first initiative was prompted by the King and Henry, bishop of Winchester, is weak, according to Scholz's opinion⁵. He suggests that the whole enterprise was more a combination of personal ambition and speculative efforts from Osbert's side⁶. Whatever the case, the pope denied the canonization. He asked for further evidence, but mainly full support by the English church⁷. The fact that Innocent had already canonized quite a large number of persons by this time, seems to have been a restraining factor in Edward's case⁸. In addition, such personal involvement from Osbert's side, combined with not very enthusiastic letters from the King, Henry the bishop of Winchester and the chapter of St Paul's⁹, were not satisfactory enough for the pope to proceed to Edward's canonization¹⁰. The first phase of the whole matter ended with the rejection of Osbert's petition.

The first attempt for Gilbert's official recognition was also unsuccessful. The head of the enterprise this time was Hubert, the archbishop of Canterbury, after the initiative of the monks in Sempringham to inform him and make the truth about Gilbert's sanctity known to the public¹¹. The plan was that some abbots of the province where Gilbert acted would investigate his deeds and miracles and inform Hubert about them in writing. He would then ask for papal approval on the basis of this information. Although the case was presented to the pope together with evidence and enough support by the English church¹², the pope requested further testimonies, the actual facts, detailed and recorded¹³. This was the first step of this fully recorded canonization process, a process which by the time Innocent was pope was complete. The second step was the collection of even more accurate testimonies. The initial support of the enterprise was enough, so there was no mention of further support.

Whereas for Gilbert's case more detailed accounts were sent to the pope and the effort was successful, the second attempt to canonize Edward did not take place until twenty two years later. This time the petition was supported by the whole English clergy¹⁴. Thirteen letters survive

⁵ Bernhard W. Scholz, 1961, The Canonization of Edward the Confessor, *Speculum*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 38-60. (p. 49).

⁶ Frank Barlow, *Edward the Confessor*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1970 p. 272.

⁷ Scholz, 1961, p. 47.

⁸ Scholz, 1961, p. 48.

⁹ Frank Barlow, 1970, p. 275.

¹⁰ Scholz, 1961, p. 48. Also, Barlow, 1970, p. 277.

¹¹ *The Book of St Gilbert*, edited by Raymonde Foreville and Gillian Keir, Oxford Medieval Texts, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987, p. 169.

¹² *The Book of St Gilbert*, pp. 169-171.

¹³ *The Book of St Gilbert*, p. 171.

¹⁴ Scholz, 1961, p. 49.

concerning this attempt. Except for these, a book of his miracles -probably Osbert's *Vita*¹⁵ - was sent, and the pope also read the letters that had been sent twenty two years ago, during the first attempt¹⁶. Probably what is supposed to have made the difference this time was the full support of the largest part of the English Church, since this book was also used at the previous request as proof of Edward's sanctity and surely was not totally trustworthy¹⁷.

This brings us to the most important issue concerning these two canonizations, the reasons for their success, or, more precisely, the points that actually made the difference the second time. While for Gilbert the case is clear -the complete and precise records of his deeds were what guaranteed his canonization- Edward's canonization did not depend on more accurate evidence but mainly on what the English clergy "reminded" the pope regarding England's support for him, in their letters. The second attempt was actually accomplished as standing for the whole English Church, but what interested the pope more this time was the support of the English, King and Church, concerning the schism. The assistance that the English provided him with was as crucial a component of the canonization as were the detailed records for Gilbert's case forty years later. Therefore, in his bull of canonization he appears satisfied with the collection of letters sent, the *Vita* and the previous letters -those sent for the first query- in order to canonize Edward. He does not even move on to a solemn council as supposed to¹⁸.

The political reasons for this canonization do not apply only to the pope's actions. The English royal dynasty would surely benefit from it, in ways that have divided modern scholars¹⁹. Therefore, there are those who assert that King Henry II pursued the canonization to secure the fusion of the Normans with the Anglo-Saxon past. By doing so, he would also "strengthen the royal position in the struggle between Church and state". By proving his religious zeal through the official canonization he would be able both to "curtail the independence of the English Church and limit the rights of Rome in England" . In this sense it seems that all this activity from Henry's side was a "bluff". Another argument that strengthens the idea that the canonization was a royal gimmick in order to increase the royal power is that the 12th century witnessed a great number of canonizations of members of royal dynasties throughout Europe. This is explained as an action from the Kings' side to balance the "transgressions of the Church into their own peculiar domain"²⁰. But it seems more accurate to suppose that what finally urged the King to support this official recognition of Edward's sanctity was the fact that through this the whole royal line which he represented would be invested with absolute "divine" authority. It is suggested that Henry's wish was not to be venerated himself as a "holy" king, succeeding an officially recognized saint, but to ensure the respect and obedience that the link between the royal dynasty he represented and the saint king would provide²¹. Maybe this also explains that while Edward did not become a very popular saint generally he was valued particularly by the medieval English monarchy²². In addition, the English Church created the whole matter so that,

¹⁵ Scholz, 1961, p. 50.

¹⁶ Barlow, 1970, p. 324.

¹⁷ Barlow, 1970, pp. 261-262, 267.

¹⁸ Kemp, 1948, p. 82.

¹⁹ Thorough discussion on this subject was found in Scholz, 1961, pp. 54-60.

²⁰ Scholz, 1961, pp. 55-56.

²¹ Scholz, 1961, pp. 58-60.

²² Barlow, Frank 2006, Edward (St Edward; known as Edward the Confessor), *Oxford Dictionary of*

National Biography Oxford University Press:

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8516>.

as the letters clearly explain²³, it would be honored in its entirety. Edward would be the first canonized saint of the English Church, and his royal blood would increase its prestige. Westminster in particular would profit from the official canonization of a king-saint buried in it, both economically and regarding its fame and importance.

In Gilbert's case, apart from the limited profits the monastery and the Gilbertine Order would gain by his canonization, there are other political aspects as well. Although there is no reason to believe that there would be any profit for the King, this is not the case, with regard to the Roman Church. There are some hints implying that, other than the clear and un-doubtful evidence about Gilbert's sanctity, the fear of the expansion of heresies at that time had a great part in the final decision. The interested party seems to consider important the fact that he founded a monastic order. They specifically stress that through his actions (mainly the foundation of the Gilbertine Order) "there has been a great flowering of holy and religious life"²⁴. The pope agrees on this matter, as he answers that Gilbert has "performed miracles" by which the evil heresy may be routed and the "catholic faith strengthened"²⁵. The saint in this case is not only the representative of God but also gathers the Christian flock against the common enemy. The English knew that this would have a key-role in the final decision, and they took advantage of it by stressing it continuously²⁶.

The evidence asked and provided concerning the two nominees highlight the great difference between the two cases. While both the popes that canonized the two saints are known for their insistence in keeping the process at a highly bureaucratic level, and while Alexander was the pope who introduced the papal authority concerning the canonization matters²⁷, he did not follow his principles in Edward's case. In the later canonization causes, he was much more demanding and detailed in his enquiries. Innocent on the other hand did not deviate from his practices. He asked for thorough evidence²⁸ both because this was the approved way to proceed on such matters, but also because he needed to have detailed records in order to convince the Church's enemies about its "holy" character, as was testified through this process.

The specific interests of all the involved parties in each case, the evolution of papal prestige and the political benefits that would derive from the canonizations formed the way of addressing the pope. In Gilbert's case the English seem much more dependent on his decision and show a rather slavish attitude. They continuously refer to the pope's involvement in the canonization as "lawful"²⁹. On the other hand, the senders of the letters concerning Edward have a more independent way of speaking to the pope. One could suggest that this is due to two factors. First of all, in Innocent's time his authority concerning canonization matters was already recognized by the major part of the Western Christianity, especially England³⁰. This suggests that by this period there was a certain way of addressing him, and a pattern was formed regarding the vocabulary used in canonization processes. Secondly, what seems to make the difference is that

²³ Barlow, 1970. pp. 310-324.

²⁴ *The Book of St Gilbert*, p. 221.

²⁵ *The Book of St Gilbert*, p. 245.

²⁶ For example letters n. 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 22, *The Book of St Gilbert*, pp. 207-235.

²⁷ Kemp, 1948, p. 82.

²⁸ *The Book of St Gilbert*, p. 235.

²⁹ For example letter n. 5, *The Book of St Gilbert*, p. 207.

³⁰ Christopher Cheney, *Innocent III and England*, Anton Hiersmann, Stuttgart, 1976, 58.

in Edward's case, it was not the English Church and King who needed the pope, but rather the opposite.

The kind of information that the letters provide also differs. For Gilbert, we have the most accurate and detailed record of his life and miracles. This is the beginning of transformation of sanctification into a judicial process, which will evolve even more later on. The English clergy in this case seems to proceed in the canonization with pure intentions. Nothing is implied, as is the case with Edward. The evidence has to satisfy the pope and his assembly, and only if it is provided will they recognize his cult. For Edward on the other hand, nothing more than general information is asked. Therefore, in most of the letters the records of his miracles are not detailed at all, and do not provide any evidence or witnesses as we see in Gilbert's case. They stress much more their support to Alexander concerning the schism, and refer to Edward's saintly characteristics quite marginally. In opposition, all the details and lengthy testimonies were demanded by the pope to convince him about Gilbert's sanctity.

If we examine more closely the two cases, we will notice other similarities and differences too. Signs of holiness both times are the miracles performed before and after death. Other merits appear as well. Gilbert's supporters stress his "pious works" and holy way of life³¹. The same appear in Edward's case. Edward's virginity is another reason for his sanctity, as is his just government³². Another component that points to his sanctity is his incorrupt body after so many years of burial. Gilbert's sanctity on the other hand is certified by his good works for the Church (as founder of an Order) and his miracles, other than his personal features.

The last topic I would like to touch upon is the importance of the *vox populi*. In the majority of the letters requesting Gilbert's canonization the idea that popular opinion would guarantee his sanctity and facilitate the process is obvious. For the King, Gilbert's holiness is confirmed by popular opinion about him³³. The pope has a different opinion on this matter. He answers that the authentic evidence is to confirm the popular veneration³⁴. On the other hand, as Edward is concerned, in only two of the surviving letters there is a record of support by the whole kingdom, and only one of them mentions the general belief that he was a saint³⁵. It is obvious that the petitioners do not even need the *vox populi* to request Edward's canonization, which on other occasions was essential.

The sources that provide us with the information concerning the canonization of the two saints are important, each in its own way. *The Book of St Gilbert* is the first complete narrative of a canonization cause, therefore its value as a historical source is great. It informs about the evolution of the pope's authority but also about the development of the notion of sanctity. What was demanded in order for Gilbert to be canonized reflects the idea of sainthood in that period. The letters concerning the canonization of Edward on the contrary show what was needed for someone to become a saint when there were political interests involved. The readiness of Alexander to add him to the catalogues of saints without actual evidence proves the interaction between the Church and the secular authorities in periods of weighty political events.

³¹ For example letters n. 5, 9, 12, 13, 14, 20, etc, *The Book of St Gilbert*, pp. 207-245.

³² Barlow, 1970, pp. 314, 318, 323.

³³ *The Book of St Gilbert*, p. 215.

³⁴ Andre Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 1997, p. 37.

³⁵ Barlow, 1970, pp. 313, 315.

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