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St. Xaviera

Ten years ago, on an especially bitter winter's day, I received a letter from a young parish priest in Brooklyn. It directed my attention to yet another "growth" of a local saint. Most such cases never passed my hands; few get to the stage of attention by the Holy Office, of advocate and devil's advocate. But I was struck: the putative saint was Xaviera Hollander.

Father Brent, the young priest, was certainly too young to know. Some twenty years before, when the triumph of the Spiritual Counter-revolution seemed to be waning, the symbol of the new decay had been that very Xaviera. Her book The Happy Hooker had shaken off almost a century's dust, and disgraced every bookshop with its salacious message. Loose morals and pleasure-seeking abounded. I remember our Superior coming in on an evening and saying bitterly: "Bananas were served in Mrs. Winterley's salon today. You can always tell whether a woman has read The Happy Hooker by the way she eats a banana. Believe me -- most of them had." Those grim days were already long past, and Father Brent was happily innocent of them but I was not.

The letter reported the usual tale of miracles, cures, conversions; young women had begun to wear "St. Xaviera medals." The journey to New York being so arduous at that time of year, I decided to begin my investigation here in Boston. I obtained permission for access to the restricted literature collection, under the suspiciously watchful eye of the librarian. There was the book itself, its hardly less famed sequel, a collection of answers to letters in a magazine called Penthouse, and Life With The Happy Hooker, written by her erstwhile husband. The library also has a copy of Fr. J. Schroeder's "A Comparative Study of Xavier Hollander's The Happy Hooker and Polly Adler's A House Is Not A Home: Eros Devoid of Agape" (Studia Secularum XIII), but this I was not allowed to consult at the time.

The prima facie case against sainthood seemed very strong. Miss Hollander relates occurrences throughout her life which are uniformly capable of refuting holiness, if true, and if not followed by a spiritual turn later in life -- of which there was no evidence at all. Still, the matter was not black and white. She speaks, for instance, of unspeakable practices with dogs. When I consulted Leviticus, I found no explicit condemnation of these practices, since she never went so far as to have carnal knowledge of them. It seemed reasonable to assume, however, that she had unclean thoughts

during these actions; that would be enough.

There was of course the further question of truth. These books would condemn her, if true; but were they? I dilligently pursed the internal evidence, concentrating as an example on the incident in which she alledged to have had intercourse with a stranger on an airplane. Was this really possible? The motion of airplanes was apparently very smooth, smoother than that of a steam-train, my nearest comparison. Also, airplane personnel routinely supplied blankets and pillows. But still... I sought the aid of the librarian. He stuck his pencil-point nose at me, and gave me a look. I remember feeling embarrassed, thinking he suspected my motives. But when he nudged me, I realized that he had been trying to look sly. I recoiled from the nudge, involuntarily; and he shuffled off into the recesses of his stacks. In a twentieth century text he found the account of five positions said to be used in the backseats of "compact cars." Three of these would have raised the utmost consternation among the other airplane passengers, and another involved sticking one leg out of a window. But the fifth could not be ruled out.

The main reasons against treating Xaviera Hollander's writings as true evidence from her own mouth were not internal. They came from the book by her husband which abounds in thinly veiled accusations of lies, plagiarism, ghostwriting, and fabrication. The evidence being inconclusive, I set off for Brooklyn.

At that time, the steam-trains no longer ran, and the horse-coaches were not yet so well organized as they are today. Part of the way I had to rely on rickshaws, which to this day I find a humiliating and debasing experience. One of the rickshaw men, I recall, hawked and spit and coughed the entire five hours he served me. I called out to him, encouraged him to take a rest half way, but he just shook his head doggedly. To make the journey worse, one still had frequent encounters then with other religions. Of course, there have been no adherents of the so-called "liberal" churches since the spiritual Counter-Revolution of the 1980's, which averted the impending worldwide crisis of food and energy. But when I came into Amherst, the road was blocked by a large troupe of walking rabbis (it was a Saturday), who were trying to get by a Pentecostal streetcorner revival meeting. There were also a number of Mormon missionaries I believe, for I saw men in black hats approaching the Pentecostals on the outskirts of the meeting, and being rebuffed by cries of "allelujah!" The chaos became indescribable, and it took us a good hour to get through the melee. Today, I am happy to say, these people stay in their own theocracies where they belong.

After four day's journey, further hampered by heavy snow south of Amherst, I arrived in New York. Father Brent greeted me at the rectory door; he was a slim, ascetic looking young man, the skin drawn taut over his cheekbones almost translucent, like parchment. By the turf fire in his drawing room

he told me more about the Xaviera sentiment growing in his parish. Its center and possible source, he said, was the convent of the Holy Thorn a few miles away. The nuns apparently associated Xaviera Hollander somehow with the founding of their convent a century or more ago. He had met the current Mother Superior several times, though not recently -- a very holy woman he thought her. Her name, I learned with some dismay, was Mother Frances Xaviera. On Father Brent's urging I agreed to lose no time in approaching the convent, and I called there the following afternoon.

Mother Frances was thrown into some confusion by my coming and proposed investigation. Yet I had the impression that I was not totally unexpected. She received me in her office, indicating a low armchair by the window, and seated her own rather statuesque person in a great wooden chair opposite. Her eyes remained modestly fixed on my collar as we talked. According to her story the convent had included three nuns, two of whom had been Mother Superior, who had considered themselves "daughters of the spirit" of Miss Hollander. The last had died thirty years before. I asked her if she knew of Hollander's reputation as madam of a house of ill repute. Indeed she did, she said colouring; but this house had been an instrument, admittedly unorthodox, of spiritual enlightenment. It was thus that St. Xaviera had attracted the worst sinners, both as clients and as employees. These sinners were almost uniformly led to repentance and conversion. It had been almost like a convent. "Conveniently self-supporting in its finances" I added somewhat cynically, and she coloured again. But determinedly ignoring my innuendo, she produced two sheaves of paper. The first was the evidence quietly gathered by the three "daughters," at a time when their cause would have been the laughing stock of the world. The second was the evidence gathered by Mother Frances herself, during the last five years.

In my room in Father Brent's rectory that night, I read the second sheaf first. Nothing very surprising there; the usual collection of conversions and miracles. A number of cases of venereal disease miraculously cured. What else would I have heard from these young women, if I had taken testimony? Miraculously cured pregnancies too perhaps? The other sheaf was a remarkable collection of reminiscences and testimonials by the three daughters. Out of it fluttered just one independent witness, one piece of objective evidence. It was sealed and notarized, an account by the man in the airplane.

To begin, the man's account agreed with that in the book. He had been greatly, and he thought at the time sexually, attracted to Miss Hollander (he wrote "Ms," an archaic term). As it seemed to him then, she had instructed him in a certain sexual position; but it was not, at the date of his writing, clear to him that it had really been so. He had lost consciousness during the process, but not before entering "the most mysterious, most profound experience in my life. It was as if I was falling, falling into a new country of blue, vertiginous mountains...."

The account went on like this for a while, and I had a sudden shock of recognition: this was the typical account of a mystical experience! I leafed quickly through the old women's testimonies, and saw them with new eyes: though veiled, there were references throughout to mystic experience. And here I faced that spectre which has haunted the Church these many long ages, the Waldensian threat, the Taoist barbarity, the Kama Sutra atrocity: the vilest heresies, the delusion of heaven approached through sexual ecstasy.

In my mind's eye I could see it, this cancer spreading out from Brooklyn, the pagan perversions once again taking possession of the earth. One convent succumbing to the unnatural practices, to the demon-inspired error and delusion of three old women, reared in a whore-house; and the world led astray by a female Antichrist, Xaviera of the Shadows.

A danger that had not threatened the Church between the Waldensian excesses of the eleventh century and the Walloon satanism of the nineteenth, had raised its goat's head again. Writhing visible to all in the decadent secular world of past centuries, but steadfastly kept outside the domain of the Church, it had now broken in by a back door. Such were my suspicions that cold winter's evening in Brooklyn, and I determined on drastic measures to put this question to the test. My Society has at times been charged with the idea that the end justifies the means. We have never accepted this idea in the Machiavellian form -- that if the outcome of an action is beneficial, then the action was therefore good. We believe only that it is by the end in mind, that intention, that the act must be judged. And my intention was to save the soul of Mother Frances, and the souls of the countless thousands which might be placed in eternal peril, should such a new heresy spread.

I gave Father Brent my instructions. Mother Frances was to be invited for mulled claret in the rectory. I handed him the drops that were to be placed in her glass, and her's alone. Indeed, he remonstrated. He held the Reverend Mother to be a holy woman, he told me, more saintly than any person he had met, even in Seminary. Was this a new development? I interrogated him sternly, and ascertained that this remonstrance was merely a lapse; not the first stain of heresy to be detected in our priesthood. He was a dutiful son of the Church, and understood his instructions.

Now comes the most awful -- I mean this in the old sense, awe-full -- part of my narrative, and the reason I set down these notes on a closed file. The three of us gathered together in the rectory study, by the large log fire. The Reverend Mother kneeled on the bear rug before it, mulled claret held in supplicant hands, confessing herself prepared to answer all my questions. I sipped from my glass, attempting to formulate the questions in my mind. A strange light-headedness came over me, and a penetrating sense of realistic understanding such as I rarely attained before. This shock, I recall saying to myself, of being in the midst of a great spiritual crisis for the Church -- the more so for its unexpected



for

nature -- cleared my head as if Grace swept away the cobwebs. And as we three, we were together caught up in the midst of this, a place of momentary calm in a universe-wide battle of Demonic and Celestial powers. Somehow, the questions I had prepared for the Mother did not leave my lips. Somehow, I found myself speaking agape, Christian love, contrasted with eros, its pale carnal reflection. And somehow, heaven alone shall eventually reveal to me how, I found myself demonstrating to Mother Frances, with Father Brent's helping hands supporting me at the midriff, that difficult fifth position which St. Xaviera must have taught the man on the airplane. My last, as it were, earthly memory of that evening is the scramble of warm and loving naked bodies, engaged in that strange experiment on the bear rug before the fire. For I too lost consciousness, but not before entering the most mysterious, most profound experience in my life. It was as if I was falling, falling into a new country of blue, vertiginous mountains....

Awakening the next morning, I found myself in a horse-drawn sleigh, traversing the snowbound wastes of Connecticut. The driver was a deaf-mute; he wore a sickly grin. I was warmly dressed, wrapped in travelling rugs that must have been Father Brent's. Returned to Boston, I conscientiously placed the main evidence before my superiors; they ordered the file closed. Most of the nuns of the Hold Thorn were, I gathered later, relocated elsewhere. Certainly, this case must have been one factor in my own early retirement. But I am unable, in all good conscience, to drive these memories from my mind, or attribute them to merely carnal influences. The possibility remains that Grace, moving mysteriously through a long deceased courtesan, touched me that night.

