

Dr. Eric de Saventem and Christian Nobility

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By Dr. John Rao

However painful it may be to remind ourselves that we have lost two outstanding International Federation Presidents in the space of one twelve month period, both love and respect for Dr. Eric de Saventem's powerful example demand that his passing be given a sorrowful pride of place in these pages. The basic details of his life need not be retold here, extraordinary though they were, and so illustrative of the unique problems faced by Catholics in a violent and anti-religious age. Many Una Voce members are already as familiar with his personal saga and achievements as they are with those of Michael Davies. Let us therefore seize this sad occasion to undertake something which I believe to be much more appropriate to Dr. de Saventem's long-term significance; of much greater utility to his extended Una Voce family than a mere chronological account of his labors can provide: an extended meditation upon the concept of Christian nobility and our late President's embodiment of its chief characteristics.

What is nobility? Perhaps few terms have been as brutally cheapened in our revolutionary era as this exalted one has been. Most people today equate nobility solely with the idea of an upper class based upon riches, and riches generally earned in rather crass and vulgar crowd pleasing ways. Noblesse oblige is often measured solely in terms of how much cash the "nobleman" in question gives away to the community at large. What comes to my mind constantly in this regard are graduation ceremonies where the precise sums which honorary degree recipients have donated to buy their "noble" academic status are read out loud by some shameless university official.

For most of the human experience, however, nobility has had little openly or directly to do with even honorably won wealth and its laudable dispersal. Strictly speaking, a nobleman, at his origins, has historically been nothing other than "a known quantity". He has been someone who "is clearly what he is" and can always be counted upon to represent the specific standards he has espoused both reliably and gloriously. A nobleman passes on those standards for others to live up to and, hopefully, to surpass. The brilliance of his achievement weighs most intimately and forcefully upon his immediate family, giving it a certain edge in the struggle to follow in its "known

quantity's" path, but, conversely, a much more intense shame to live down if it does not. Still, the greater the nobleman and his glory, the more his model urges itself as a standard for the whole of society to emulate, and the more its failures parallel, in depth, any scandals aroused by his delinquent family.

Historical nobility has also been closely associated with a life of painful exertion which, rather than necessarily ending in peaceful enjoyment of one's goods, may actually involve their total rejection. Life-long strain, self-donation, respect of previous examples of stubborn persistence and denial, and even willing acceptance and abandonment to death are central to the achievement of the noble soldiers, athletes, family heads, and statesmen depicted for us in the works of Homer, Pindar, Solon the Lawgiver, and our other Greek and Roman forefathers.

But struggle, sacrifice, and hero worship can be terribly flawed if the standard that is pursued and the known quantities who are honored are ultimately false and shallow in character. This was why Plato recast the image of the nobleman on the model of Socrates, the ideal individual who understood that life was a pilgrimage from darkness to the light of Truth, and that only when and if this Truth were discovered, could its spread to others require unconditional self-sacrifice. This was why Church Fathers like St. Gregory of Nyssa, who greatly admired the Platonic quest, nevertheless saw the need to complete it by extending it into the realm of the supernatural, fixing our final attention upon the Divine Nobleman, Christ--the Way, the Truth, and the Life, as well as the Good Shepherd who sacrifices Himself for His sheep. Plato's nobleman was more exalted than his earlier counterpart, since he no longer merely gave wholehearted testimony to any standard whatsoever, but to a true one and a true one alone. The Christian nobleman was more illustrious still, because he abandoned himself completely to an imitation of that Word Incarnate who transforms and ineffably elevates all nature in service to the Living God.

Building a Christian nobility has always been a difficult task. Human individuals, even those open to the medicine we call grace, can readily fall prey to the shallow and lying seductions of a creation flawed by sin; to a scandalous, hypocritical, surface adherence to what should be an all-consuming Imitation of Christ. Given the wicked temptations accompanying warfare, and the peculiar circumstances of early medieval history, efforts to

construct that nobility were first aimed at the whole body of western soldiery. Saints and statesmen sought mightily to turn this malitia (evil force) away from unscrupulous visions of glory and focus it upon creation of a militia Christi, composed of committed crusading knights who fought only other combatants and solely on behalf of the weak in demonstrably just warfare. So effective were Catholic labors in this realm, that it became possible to use the image of the Christian knight as a model for the ennoblement of men and women in other spheres of life as well. This is why a St. Francis of Assisi could take over military imagery and use it to stir men on to ascetic and missionary battles; a St. Dominic to the clash of the intellectual against heresy.

Personally, this is also why every time I think of the Christian nobleman, I have in mind the famous sixteenth century woodcut of Albrecht Dürer. Here one sees a rather gnarled armored knight on horseback, traveling to the Heavenly Jerusalem, which is set on a hill in the background distance. The forest through which he passes is a frightening one, filled with all manner of threats including singularly macabre ones which perhaps represent his own fantastic temptations. Nevertheless, single minded in commitment to reaching his goal, he rides steadfastly onwards. He will not deviate from his path no matter how bizarre or intense the obstacles to it. Nor will he grow overly alarmed by them. He is calm throughout the nightmare. Here is a man who suggests courage and can command without arrogance; a commander one can follow and obey without self-abasement and fawning. The authority behind his personal confidence and that which he inspires in others comes from God and not from himself.

Dr. de Saventem, as far as I am concerned, was precisely the kind of complete nobleman, natural and Christian, outlined above. Guiding his already innately steadfast, reliable spirit was an intellect which had been superbly trained for and aimed at the quest for understanding Truth in Plato's sense of the hunt. His Socratic abilities were sharpened in a particular way by that linguistic knowledge which allows a man to grasp the Truth aesthetically and personally, in all of its multiform complexity and unending beauty. Piloting his sharpened and aesthetically awakened intellect was a soul dedicated to prayer and the regimen provided by a profound sacramental life. How could this embodiment of Catholic nobility not then ride forth and lock in battle with an unreceptive and uncomprehending era? How could he not contest with all of his energy an

age that refused to cultivate the one methodology that could truly and completely ennoble it-- adoration, abandonment, and imitation of Christ? How could a man with his appreciation of the Eucharist not especially combat this self-destructive, man-centered, vulgarizing refusal when recognizing it in a false liturgical reform? How could he not strain and suffer and donate his fortune and his health to such a cause, calling upon the memory of past Christian noble heroes to sustain him in years of unrewarded struggle?

The gifts of the Holy Spirit to a Christian knight, as well as to every ordinary believer on his way to a similar ennoblement, involve both wisdom and calm, wrapped in one harmonious package. I don't think that anyone who enlisted under Dr. de Saventem's command and heard his orders could possibly deny that he, especially, offered the crystal-clear realism of a wise man combined with the patience and far-sightedness of a believer who recognizes the strange ways in which God works His will. Unwavering in his loyalty to the indefectible Bride of Christ, he nevertheless knew that she was wandering off onto one of the worst of the all too many unfortunate detours she has taken on her trouble-filled pilgrimage to God; unstinting in his criticism of her loss of sanity, he was unmovable in a measured and even-tempered way, with the sure conviction that this madness, too, would sometime pass way; bound irrevocably to the one unchanging code of the orthodox Faith, he could easily discern the same noble Catholic spirit in a myriad of quite different outward envelopes, including that represented by his handpicked successor, Michael Davies.

Dr. de Saventem was a man who both confirmed and yet gave the lie to William Butler Yeats's famous poem, *The Second Coming*. Yes, one might be tempted to say upon hearing him speak, things are falling apart. The center does not hold. Mere anarchy has been loosed upon the world. Some rough beast indeed slouches towards Bethlehem to be born. And yet here, to give the lie to Yeats's lamentation, was this true nobleman, this Optimate, this best among the best, who nevertheless did possess all conviction, and was, simultaneously, full of passionate intensity of the right kind. Here was a Catholic known quantity if ever there was one, and when and where we bewildered novices needed him.

Families and communities possessing a noble vision and noble heroes often try to give them still greater splendor by stretching their roots further into their past than anything but legend warrants. Thus, the Romans depicted their self-sacrificing mission of law and order as one stemming from the early days of the Republic, and the medievals transformed their first barbaric ancestors into fully formed Christian knights. Useful as such legends can be to create standards for future generations to follow, it is better to have real flesh and blood models of nobility to pressure us into action. This fact was drilled into my consciousness some years ago when my wife and I visited an Italian prince's castle and were taken to say his little daughter's evening prayers in the family chapel: in front of the tombs of the immediate family saints.

Our Una Voce Family has just such an historical model in Dr. Eric de Saventem, his life, and his mission. Our long time leader is the true founder of our noble apostolate; of our noble line. If we wish the society around us to take what our heroic president had to say and do seriously, then we, like the immediate family of any other nobleman, have more of a responsibility than anyone else to follow him, emulate him, and, if possible, surpass him in his achievements. If we, like other noble lines, aided by the charism of our founders, do not shoulder our burden in carrying on their work, then the scandal will be ours and we will be judged more harshly accordingly.

Holy Virgin and all you saints of God, pray for our dear, departed Dr. Eric de Saventem. May his soul and all the souls of the faithfully departed Christian knights rest in peace. May their example inspire us in the battles yet to come.