

Servant of God, Isaac Hecker

"A Saint for our Times"

Remarks of Timothy Cardinal Dolan to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Canonization Cause of the Servant of God Father Isaac Thomas Hecker

My brother bishops, it is my honor to propose for your endorsement the canonization cause of the Servant of God, Father Isaac Thomas Hecker. As many of you know, his life is a classic American story: the son of immigrants, raised by a single mother, Isaac Hecker didn't have it easy. After surviving smallpox as a child, he worked his way through school and helped provide for his family. Seeing the plight of his fellow New Yorkers, he became politically active, striving to eliminate poverty and injustice. He quickly became disillusioned with politics, though, and began asking the bigger questions: Who is God? What is truth? Why are we here? Like a modern-day Augustine, his restless heart was searching. He studied and visited various movements, and would have recognized himself in the many young people today who claim to be spiritual but not religious. His openness to the truth soon brought him to reckon with the claims of Catholicism. Here, the yearning of his heart met the rigor of his mind, and he found himself home.

He could not keep the joy of his conversion to himself, however. Like those apostles on Pentecost, he was on fire to share this good news with everyone. For the rest of his life, Isaac Hecker maintained a deep devotion to the Holy Spirit, whom he trusted to guide his ministry. His zeal led him firstly to the Redemptorists, and later to found the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle. His patron was well-chosen, as Fr. Hecker set out like St. Paul to win the world for Christ. He was a multi-media missionary: in the parish missions he preached, the lectures he delivered, the books he published, the periodicals he founded, the countless columns he penned, Fr. Hecker worked tirelessly to proclaim the Word of God. His purpose was twofold: to make the Catholic faith appealing and accessible to a skeptical and at times hostile population, and to educate and encourage Catholics in their own faith, enabling them to become ambassadors for Christ. In all of this, Fr. Hecker resisted the polemical and controversial tone of some of his fellow apologists. Rather, he sought an apostolate of attraction, to propose the faith with clarity and charity, always assuming the goodwill of those whom he addressed.

Fr. Hecker's efforts were animated by a deep sense of hope in the future of America: despite the divisions that even then were tearing the country apart, Fr. Hecker believed that the Catholic Church was uniquely positioned to heal and unite the American people, reminding us all of our universal sonship in Christ. In the face of a skeptical Old World, Fr. Hecker believed that America's founding principles formed a fertile field for the faith. With the Church unfettered to propose her beliefs in the marketplace of ideas, he had every confidence that the truth would prevail. His confidence and trust in the Holy Spirit cast out all fear. This was not the false optimism of rose-colored glasses, but the conviction of faith seen through the bright light of truth, and the fire of love. Fr. Hecker was convinced that when the Holy Spirit renews the individual soul, that soul would help build up the Church, and the Church would then sanctify the world. His faith ought to inspire us as we call upon that same Spirit to fill our hearts, and to renew the face of the earth. I ask the prayers of this Servant of God as we strive to continue his own missionary work in this vineyard of America, sharing his joy and his steadfast loyalty to the Church that he called home, and I ask for your endorsement, brother bishops, that the Church may soon raise to the altars this Servant of God, a son of our shores, and a saint for our times.