

We Are All Called to Be Saints

If we look at the lives of the saints, we can find more than a few faults. Far from discouraging us, this should give us a measure of hope.

With the Feast of All Saints, I started thinking: Everybody loves the saints, but how many of us can really relate to them? This presents a problem. To begin with, although we read the lives of the saints and admire them, most of us cannot imagine ourselves in that sacred company. Of course, we know that, besides the more “famous” saints, there are those who will never be honored by the Church with miracles and a feast day. St. Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, wrote “to the church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours” (1 Cor 1:2). He would have written that same letter to all of us because the Corinthians were struggling to make their faith active in their lives, just as we are.

Saint-Making 101

We need to talk about becoming a saint with a lowercase s—one of the millions of unnamed and unknown persons who have found God in their lives and loved God with all their minds, souls and hearts.

You know many of them and so do I. We had a secretary at the university, my alma mater, who was the most generous and giving person I knew. She died young, but even the week before her death she was eager to help anyone who needed anything. I also know a young teacher with great wit, intelligence and humor. He is the most profoundly prayerful person I have ever met.

But none of us can *make* ourselves saints. None of us can even say the name of Jesus in faith without his grace. It is God who reaches out to us, not we who first choose God. God reaches out to us every day in a million ways, so grace is always there. It all starts with God and it ends with God, and in between there are nothing but God-laden moments, although we may not always recognize them as such.

Tough Act to Follow

We all have our favorite saints—the joyful St. Francis of Assisi, the gentle St. Thérèse of Lisieux, her older Carmelite sister, the strong and sensible St. Teresa of Avila.

It is very Catholic and delightful, it seems to me, the way we feel so at home with the saints that we not only admire them and ask their intercession with God for spiritual favors, but also send them requests for the daily things of life. St. Anthony of Padua is a good example. Some of us remember the little prayer rhyme to him: “Tony, Tony, look around; something’s lost that must be found.”

Still, we tend to think that we can never imitate or measure up to most of the saints. We look at the saints who died for their faith—the martyrs—some of whom suffered horribly. Some of us are frightened when we think of St. Joan of Arc being burned alive, the torture

that the North American Jesuit martyrs suffered in 1646 or the long and lonely prison terms of some of today's martyrs. We shudder and hope that God will preserve us from those trials.

We think of the missionaries of old who left their homes and all that was familiar to them and headed off to serve God, which required immense sacrifices, sickness or even death. Some went with the disapproval of their families, which must have torn them deeply. These saints we cannot hope to imitate. They had a special calling from God that far surpasses our ordinary assignments.

We think of those who founded religious orders or established new types of service in the Church. Again, these people had a unique vocation. It is very hard to find on the Church's liturgical calendar just plain everyday people.

Love for God and Neighbor

The reason is not that those everyday people do not often become saints. It may be because they do not have "lobbyists." More than 80 percent of the canonized saints are clerics or members of religious orders. Since canonization takes so long, one needs a group dedicated to the work of seeing it through to Rome.

In spite of this, it is important for us to remember that those who have become saints did so not because of the so-called great deeds they performed, but because of the love of God and neighbor that drove them. We don't have to look hard to find the truth of this. All we need are the words of St. Paul:

"If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Seven Characteristics of the Saints

- 1) All saints are filled with the love of God. They have chosen God above all others and made a definite commitment to God. In her book *Saint Watching* (Viking Press), Phyllis McGinley writes that saints are human beings with an added dimension. "They are obsessed by goodness and by God as Michelangelo was obsessed by line and form, as Shakespeare was bewitched by language, Beethoven by sound."
- 2) All saints love other human beings. It cannot be any other way. In the First Letter of John (4:20) we read: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." McGinley also says that, although saints may be different in many ways, they are always generous. You will never find a stingy saint.

- 3) All saints are risk-takers. When God called, they answered. For some it was taking a chance on a new way of life in a new place. In the Old Testament, we have the example of Abraham, called at an old age to leave his country and to go to the place God had selected for him. Even today, it is difficult for older people to leave their level of comfort and to face the new and unknown. Abraham's story is a marvelous example of trust in God, but even more so of a decision to plunge into the unknown. Like Abraham, saints responded to the graces that were given to them. Some were called to be popes, bishops, abbots or abbesses. Others found their calling in a quiet, reserved life, far away from the center of activity. St. Julian of Norwich lived in a small cell attached to a church. She was even walled in, but that did not keep people away; they came to her and asked for her spiritual advice. St. Catherine of Siena lived at home, not in a convent, as a person dedicated to God. People flocked to her, but not because she wanted them to. Others, whose names are not well-known, lived simple lives among their families and friends, serving God with all their hearts, but never making a splash in the world.
- 4) The saints are humble. Humility has always had a poor press; many people think that humility means saying derogatory things about oneself. Far from it! The saints showed their humility by using whatever gifts they had to perfection, but never attributing these gifts to themselves. St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas were brilliant men and they did not go around saying how stupid they were. They did acknowledge, however, that all they knew was as nothing compared to the infinite wisdom of God.
- 5) Saints are people of prayer. Some, especially members of religious orders, had entire days of prayer. Others found their time with God in other ways. Dorothy Day—not canonized but recognized by many as a truly holy person—started her day with prayer but said that she met God daily in the crowds of the poor who came to her hospitality house. None of the saints saw prayer as a waste of time or as an activity for only the weak or naive.
- 6) The saints are not perfect. Each of the saints had human flaws and faults. They made mistakes. Even at the end of their lives, they still found themselves in need of contrition, pardon and reconciliation. St. Jerome, it is said, had a fearful temper. When another scholar of his time, a former friend, Rufinus, questioned his conclusions, Saint Jerome wrote pamphlet after pamphlet blasting him. St. Aloysius apparently had bad timing in his spiritual quest; the other novices were just as happy when he was not there. He was the kind of saint who did not seem to know how to enjoy the things of this life. Some saints misunderstood their own visions. When St. Francis was told to rebuild the Church, he thought it meant the local church building. It is interesting and amusing to note that Jesus did not clarify the request for him until after he had exerted a lot of sweat and energy repairing an old church. St. Joan of Arc was coerced into signing a retraction of her visions, although she later retracted that retraction. St. John Vianney, “the Curé of

Ars,” did not believe the children of La Salette concerning their visions of the Virgin Mary. During the time of the Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy at the end of the 14th century and beginning of the 15th, when one pope resided in Avignon and another pope in Rome, saints found themselves on opposite sides of the rival popes, as confused as many of the common people were.

- 7) The saints are people of their times. One wonders how anyone escapes being of his or her time. There were injustices around the saints that they did not speak out against. St. Paul did not condemn slavery but encouraged slaves to obey their masters. St. Thomas Aquinas considered women unequal to men. He believed their only task in life was to bear children.

If we look at the lives of all the saints, we can certainly find faults. Far from discouraging us, this can give us courage. Perfection is not what we are striving for, unless it is as perfect a love as possible.

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