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BY KATHY COFFEY



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When we sing the Litany of the Saints at the Easter Vigil, an ordination, or the Mass of All Saints' or All Souls' Day, we're washed in a tide of Church history and immersed in a deep pool of human holiness. Calling saints by name acknowledges that they have unique stories; they aren't a vague conglomerate. Their names arc over the assembly like banners of hope, inviting us: "Be like us. Do as we did."

What do we know about those saints we call upon in prayer? If we think of them as remote and out of touch, we do them and ourselves a great disservice. What if, instead, they were like our friends on social media? What nuggets of wisdom would they post? Knowing even a little of their stories humanizes them and draws them closer.

INFINITE (AND SPOTTY) VARIETY

If we envision the journey of faith as a mountain climb, many paths lead to the summit. No one mold fits all the saints, so we need not conform to an exact model of holiness. In fact, God must have gone wild with creativity in shaping each unique one—delighting in Martha's cooking, Rose's gardening, Aquinas' intellect, Frances Cabrini's activity, and John of the Cross' poetry.

The communion of saints is made up of people who admit to being sinners. Whether crotchety, neurotic, greedy, strange, scruffy, addicted, conflicted, or outspoken, they didn't let it drag them down. Instead of focusing on their flaws, they looked to God's fidelity and the marvels God was doing in and through them. They muddled through efforts to improve their worlds. If they failed as parents, teachers, ministers, or any other calling, they each knew that the bottom line was remaining God's beloved daughter or son.

IN SPITE OF DARKNESS

Don't ever assume the saints had it easy. They had more than their share of exile, torture, ridicule, illness, failure, and loss. Hear, for example, the cry of Elizabeth of Hungary when told her husband had died in battle: "The world is dead to me, and all that was joyous in the world." In-laws, who scorned her generosity to the poor, banished her and her newborn child to a pig shed in winter.

Saints see suffering more as a door than a wall. "The confidence of the Christian," writes Thomas Merton, "is always a confidence in spite of darkness and risk, in the presence of peril, with every evidence of possible disaster." The saints didn't deny the dark, nor did they whistle in it, but they saw through it to something greater. They put flesh on the saying "No way out but through; no Easter without Good Friday." Through the language of their lived experiences, we learn the inevitability of suffering—and how to handle it.

While suffering becomes a dark pit of despair for some people, many saints transformed their suffering into good for others. Catherine of Genoa spent five years depressed

about her arranged marriage to a notorious degenerate. But after experiencing a sudden sense of God's goodness, she began to care for patients at Pammatone, a large hospital in Genoa. Eventually serving as hospital administrator, she didn't let responsibility for multiple details deter her from growing happiness and creativity. When she ran out of room indoors for plague victims, she requisitioned sails from the port to shade those dying outdoors, shepherding them into heaven along a corridor of care.

The death of one's spouse can be devastating. Jane de Chantal was widowed at age twenty-eight with four children under the age of five. She grieved but adapted, studying herbal medicine and midwifery and using her home to nurse the sick poor. Alphonsus Rodriguez lost his wife, mother, and daughter within three years; then his business failed. Because of poor health and little education, the Jesuits rejected him several times but finally decided, "If Alphonsus were not fit to be a priest or a brother, he could, nevertheless, enter to become a saint." He spent forty-five years as the doorkeeper at a Majorcan college, imagining that each time the bell rang, God waited outside.

Catherine McAuley shows how saints don't exaggerate the importance of successes or mistakes but rest in a deeper security: God's care. Catherine tried to help a victimized serving girl, but in the time it took, the girl disappeared. Her maxim became "The poor need help today, not next week." That motto has been carried out ever since by the Sisters of Mercy and the Mercy Corps.

Cornelia Connelly's two-year-old son, John Henry, was horribly burned and died in her arms. Then in a bizarre twist, her husband, an Episcopal priest, decided to be ordained Catholic, requiring her to commit to celibacy. Poignantly, she asked, "I love my husband; I love my darling children; why must I give them up?" After she'd founded a religious order in England,





her husband left the priesthood and ordered her to resume married life. When she refused, he kidnapped the children, whom she never saw again. Her Society of the Holy Child Jesus was devoted to the “humbled God,” a helpless infant who must have stirred the image of John Henry in her heart. Cornelia Connelly was named venerable in 1992.

With neither superpowers nor special effects, the saints faced catastrophe with limitations, skills, gifts, and virtues similar to ours. They feasted on the same Eucharist and heard the same Scripture. Most of all, they looked to the face of Christ, which shines just as radiantly on us.

SURE IDENTITY

What sets the saints apart might be shown by Fr. Edward Hayes’ story about hunting dogs pursuing a rabbit. All but one dog tired and quit. Why did one persevere? “He saw the rabbit,” the story tells us. The saints, too, saw the prize.

Remember the most heart-stopping, breath-snagging, throat-constricting sight you’ve ever seen. Maybe it was eyes deep with love, a newborn child, Yosemite or Niagara Falls, moonlight on fresh snow, a field of daffodils after a grim winter. Words won’t come; all we can whisper is “Wow.” We’ve glimpsed God’s astounding brilliance. At that moment, we’re completely taken out of ourselves, so amazed and reverent that no negative thought can creep in.

IN GOOD COMPANY

The spouses of the saints aren’t mentioned in litanies, but they deserve some credit too. King Malcolm of Scotland, husband of St. Margaret, honored and partnered with her in many causes—building hospices, monasteries, and churches. Her biographer, Turgot, describes what sounds like a model marriage: “He saw that Christ truly dwelt in her heart;...what she loved, he for love of her loved too.”

When Hitler invaded Austria, most people welcomed him. The only “no” vote cast in one village was Franz Jägerstätter’s. Convinced it was evil, he later refused to serve in the Nazi army. For this he was beheaded in 1943. His wife, Franzisca, raised their three small daughters after Franz’s death. Sometimes they were near starvation because the villagers scorned her. For years, she hid his letters under her mattress. John Dear, SJ, describes her just before Franz’s beatification in 2007: “She...has the sparkling eyes of Mother Teresa, a warm, gentle soul with an infectious joy and loving kindness. She carries herself with humility, a hint of shyness. But beneath lies strength, a solid faith, deep peace, towering Gospel conviction. She stands, to my mind, as much a saint as her martyred husband.”

John Clitherow wasn’t Catholic, but he admired his wife Margaret’s steadfast dedication to a religion most unpopular in sixteenth-century England. At her trial, he blurted out that surely authorities would murder the best wife in the kingdom.

MODERN-DAY ‘SAINTS’

A saint usually isn’t canonized until long after his or her death, but strong, unofficial candidates have emerged from violent events of our own lifetimes. Sister Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN, delighted in the Brazilian rainforest and was murdered in 2005 because of her work with impoverished people there.

Franciscan Fr. Mychal Judge and first responders rushed *into* the North Tower of the World Trade Center on 9/11 when everyone else was trying to get out. In Judge’s funeral homily, Fr. Michael Duffy said, “Everyone thought he was their best friend....We come to bury his heart, but not his love. Never his love.”

The Mauser family lost their son and brother, Daniel, in the 1999 Columbine High School

massacre. Stepping beyond their grief, they adopted a baby girl from China who may not otherwise have had a loving family.

Several teachers and administrators died protecting children from the gunman at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012. Kaitlin Roig, who heard shots and hid her first-graders in a bathroom, told an interviewer, “I was thinking...We’re next. So I told them, ‘I need you to know that I love you all very much.’ I wanted that to be the last thing they’d hear, not gunfire.” Courage speaking through ordinary voices must be the song of sanctity.



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© CNS PHOTO/COURTESY HOLY NAME PROVINCE FRANCISCANS

DIG DEEPER

Do you have a favorite saint? What draws you to him or her?

How aware are you of God calling *you* to be holy? To become a saint?

What can you do to learn more about the lives of the saints?



After such an experience, the challenge is to live gratefully out of the miracle. How can we, after such a peak moment, return to our usual anxieties, complaints, and pettiness? Like Peter after Christ's transfiguration, we may wish to build a tent and stay there forever. Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity believed "we carry our heaven within ourselves." And Catherine of Siena said, "I cannot lose anything in this place of abundance I have found."

The saints knew that no matter what they faced, something within was indestructible—a divine spark of God's very life. Perhaps that's why the martyrs could go so calmly to brutal deaths. It's like the preschooler who is playing happily. When she sees her parent come to pick her up, she drops everything and runs into her parent's arms. So too, the saints have an absolute trust that, whatever they leave behind, they rush into loving arms.



In his book *Immortal Diamond*, Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr describes the "True Self" they discovered: "It has found its certainty elsewhere and now lives inside a YES that is so big that it can absorb most of the little noes."

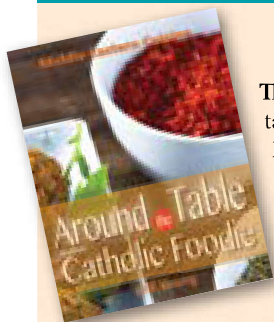
A third-century martyr, Perpetua, wrote that visits with her infant son turned her prison cell into a palace. Despite her grief for him, she faced martyrdom in the Colosseum with surety: "For this cause came we willingly unto this, that our liberty might not be obscured. For this cause have we devoted our lives." While awaiting his execution in a Nazi prison, Alfred Delp, SJ, wrote, "Others have you in their power now, but the inner law of freedom sings that no death can kill us; life is eternal."

With variety, beauty, and boldness, these flawed human beings reflect the many splendid faces of our Creator. Singing the saints should uplift us, renew us, help us put our problems in perspective, and, most importantly, inspire us on our own paths of holiness.

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