

SAINTS

by Michael D. Guinan, O.F.M.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JULIE LONNEMAN

"I'll never be a saint!" a woman insisted as she talked with her parish priest and listed her problems: her teenage children, her in-laws, one neighbor in particular. She moaned about often getting frustrated, angry, impatient. And it was such a struggle to fit in even a little time for prayer. "No," she repeated, "I'll never be a saint!"

At the funeral in England for Princess Diana, Diana's brother cautioned against making her into a saint. Addressing his dead sister, he announced: "Indeed, to sanctify your memory would be to miss out on the very core of your being, your wonderfully mischievous sense of humor with the laugh that bent you double, your joy for life transmitted wherever you took your smile...."

Both these examples suggest a mistaken view of the saints. Is it true that saints never get frustrated, never feel impatience or anger? Is it true that they have no sense of humor or joy for life, never break into a great smile? The answer is, "Of course, it's not true!"

The point of this *Update* is to show that the saints were fully human. They struggled with temptation; they savored life's joys. In these pages, we will try to better appreciate not only their love of God but also their great humanity. As Catholics, we find the saints appealing. Yet, the road to holiness is, as the opening examples suggest, a bit more complex.

Let's pause for a moment and think of some great saints. Think of your patron saint, your favorite saint. You don't have to raise your hands, but I would predict that the first examples to come to mind would share either or both of these characteristics: (1) they lived a long, long time ago, and/or (2) they were marked by something extraordinary (gifts of prayer, mystical experiences, discernment, healing powers and the like). What is happening here?

On the one hand, we are attracted to the saints and to their humanity. On the other, we push them away. In a way, we "dehumanize" the saints—in the sense of placing them

Holy and Human

on pedestals out of our reach. Over time we have forgotten that the saints were human beings, just like us. This tendency to separate the saints from their humanity can be seen even within the Bible itself.

King David: saint and sinner

One of the most important figures in the Old Testament is King David. David was still a boy when he was chosen by God. Samuel came and anointed him to succeed Saul as king (1 Sam 16:6-13). After coming to Saul's camp, David attracted attention by slaying Goliath (1 Sam 17). He became a close friend of Saul's son, Jonathan, and married Saul's daughter, Michal (1 Sam 18). He showed a real piety in sparing the life of Saul when Saul was seeking to kill him (1 Sam 24,26).

But there is more to the picture. Once David was ensconced in Jerusalem, reigning as king over all the tribes, he began to abuse his power. He saw, coveted and committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged the murder of her husband, Uriah (2 Sam 11). Confronted by the prophet, Nathan, he repented (2 Sam 12; later Jewish tradition will put Psalm 51 in his mouth in this context).

David's problems continued, however. His family was torn apart by strife and division, problems he aggravated by the way he dealt with his children. One of his generals had to trick David into taking his royal responsibilities more seriously (2 Sam 14). As he lay dying, he called Solomon to his bedside to give him some last advice, telling him of certain persons that should be killed off: "...you must bring [Shimei's] gray head down with blood to Sheol. Then David slept with his ancestors" (1 Kgs 2:5-10). David's last words are about killing. A very human David seems to have had problems with sex, family and violence!

If we continue reading in the Books of Kings, however, we notice a certain backing off from David's sinfulness. David's heart, we are told, was truly with the Lord; he followed the Lord completely in his life (1 Kgs 11:4,6). David has become the complete and faithful follower of God's covenant law, who did only what was right and did not turn aside to right or left! He is the norm by which all subsequent kings are judged (e.g., 1 Kgs

14:8; 2 Kgs 16:2; 22:2)! Is this the David we met before?

The process of cleaning up David and placing him above human vulnerability will reach its peak in the first Book of Chronicles (11—29). Not a word about Bathsheba or his problem children! In fact, anything from the Books of Samuel which would reflect unfavorably on David is carefully omitted. David's primary function now is to capture Jerusalem and lay all of the plans for the building of the Temple and for the worship which would take place there.

Special attention is given to the Temple musicians (1 Chr 25). In 1 Sam 16:14-23, David was "skillful in playing the lyre." Now he is well on his way to being the great patron and composer of psalms. David's last words are no longer political advice about assassinations, but a great prayer to God in the context of a public worship service (1 Chr 29:10-20). The transformation could not be more complete. David has been "canonized."



Jesus, model of saints

The model and the norm of Christian sanctity is found in Jesus Christ. As truly divine, Jesus reveals to us what God is like. As truly human, he reveals to us what it means to be fully human. His life, his behavior, his teaching show us what it means to be holy. We find this especially in the Gospels. Each of the Gospels reflects both the human and the divine

side of the mystery of Jesus, but the emphasis changes. If we look at the earliest and the latest of the Gospels, we will see a movement similar to that found in the story of David.

In the earliest of the Gospels, Mark, composed around 70 A.D., Jesus is indeed God's unique Son, filled with divine power (1:11; 9:7) but he also comes across as very human and very emotional. He feels anger (3:5) and indignation (10:14) and is surprised by the lack of faith he encounters (6:6). He is moved by feelings of love (10:21) and compassion (1:41; 6:34). When asked about the time of the end of the world, he acknowledges ignorance (13:32). He goes forward to his death with heart-wrenching sorrow and grief (14:34), and dies with a lament and loud cry (15:34,37).

When we turn to the last of the Gospels, John, composed around 90 A.D., a very different picture emerges. Jesus is indeed the Word made flesh (1:14) with human feelings (see 11:5, 33-38), but he comes across as a transcendent, majestic figure. He knows what he will do and what others will do (2:25). He assures his disciples in advance that he is freely giving up his life (10:17-18). There is no agony in the garden; Jesus is completely in charge (18:4-6). When he is brought before Pilate, Pilate may think he is in control, but it is actually Jesus who leads the discussion (18:33-38; 19:9-12). He dies only when he says that all is fulfilled (19:30). As one writer has observed, in John, Jesus is human but his feet barely touch the ground.

The tension between Jesus' divinity and his humanity is challenging. It is much easier to let go of one side or the other: Either Jesus is not God—just a great (even the greatest) human—or Jesus is not human but divine. Throughout its history, Christianity has affirmed the necessity of holding on to both the humanity *and* the divinity of Jesus.

In the early Christian centuries, responding to various heresies, Jesus' divinity came to be stressed. Later, in the Middle Ages, the sense of Jesus' humanness was rediscovered (St. Francis of Assisi is a key example), but then the pendulum swung the other way after the Reformation. Only with Vatican Council II has an appreciation of Jesus' humanness emerged once again.

Christian saints



PETER & PAUL

Two important New Testament saints are Peter and Paul, but what disparate personalities! Peter, the simple Galilean fisherman, was the leader of the apostles, but he could at times be

impetuous (Mt 14:28-31; 16:21-23), even denying Jesus after his arrest (Mt 26:69-75). He was forgiven much and would give up his life for the gospel (John 21:15-19).

Paul, on the other hand, was a highly educated cosmopolitan Jew from Tarsus. We know how he persecuted Christians

with a vengeance, before converting to Christ and devoting his life to spreading the good news. But he remained a testy character—not always the easiest person to deal with (recall his confrontation with Peter in Gal 2:11-14). Paul too would lay down his life for the gospel. The two great apostles who apparently

Six SAINTS for the New Millennium

FRANCIS OF ASSISI (1182-1226). Raised in a merchant family, Francis, as a youth, aspired to wealth and military fame. After turning his life over to God, the "little poor man" went through the world full of joy and the love of Jesus. He strove in all things to be an instrument of God's peace. He did this because he saw in every human being as well as in all of creation, not an enemy, but a brother and sister in Christ. St. Francis was named the patron of ecology in 1979 by Pope John Paul II.



♦ **Gifts for the third millennium:** Francis' love and respect for all of creation, as well as his example as peacemaker

MARTIN DE PORRES (1579-1639). Martin was born in Lima, Peru, of a Spanish knight and a black former slave woman. He joined the Dominicans as a lay brother and showed great love for the poor. He mixed a deep life of prayer with service in the kitchen and laundry—as well as with giving alms at the front door. Though Martin's dark complexion linked him with a minority class, his own care reached out to all human beings regardless of race or social status. He often cared for slaves brought in from Africa.



♦ **Gifts for the third millennium:** Martin's example of universal love. He is the patron saint of interracial justice and harmony. He inspires the Church to open the ranks of sainthood to a wider ethnic diversity.

POPE JOHN XXIII (1881-1963). While not formally canonized, the holiness of "good Pope John" is universally recognized. Of poor peasant background, he became a professor of Church history before assuming diverse tasks of Vatican diplomacy. Known for his human warmth and humor and a heart that embraced all peoples, his concern for social justice and for peace on earth came to expression in his encyclicals.

♦ **Gifts for the third millennium:** John's confidence in the Spirit, evidenced by his calling the Second Vatican Council

CATHERINE OF SIENA (1347-1380). A twin and the 24th of 25 children, Catherine entered the lay Third Order of St. Dominic. After a time of giving herself to contemplation, she came to realize that she must also actively serve others. She carried on extensive correspondence with all kinds of people, from popes and kings to humble workers and even prostitutes. Her theological writings, rooted in deep pastoral experience and common sense, earned her the title of Doctor of the Church. She is one of only three women to be so honored (the others are Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux).



♦ **Gifts for the third millennium:** Catherine's skills of conciliation among groups

LIZABETH ANN SETON (1774-1821). The first American-born saint (in New York City), she married and she bore five children. After the death of her husband, she became a Roman Catholic and began to serve the poor in the Baltimore area, especially in the field of education. A well-educated woman, she trained teachers, wrote textbooks, translated spiritual writings from French. She founded the Sisters of Charity and is considered a founder of Catholic parochial school education in the United States. At her canonization in 1975, Pope Paul VI praised her for her contributions as wife, mother, widow and consecrated religious.



♦ **Gifts for the third millennium:** Elizabeth Ann's witness to an authentic American spirituality in a land where temporal prosperity threatens to extinguish it

OTHER TERESA OF CALCUTTA (1910-1997). Born in Albania, she joined a religious order and served in India. While acting as principal of a Catholic high school in Calcutta, she was moved by the presence of the sick and dying on the city streets. In 1948 she received permission to leave her post and begin a ministry among the sick, a ministry that led to her founding a new order, the Missionaries of Charity. She received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. While not formally canonized, at her death in 1997 the world knew it had lost a saint.

♦ **Gifts for the third millennium:** Teresa's special love and care for "the poorest of the poor"

had some trouble sharing the same room now share the same feast day (June 29).



AUGUSTINE & JEROME

St. Jerome (approximately 340-420), after a good education and much travel, became a priest and devoted himself to a life of asceticism and contemplation focused especially on the Scriptures as the word of God. "To be ignorant of the Scriptures is to be ignorant of Christ," he once said. After the death in 384 of Pope Damasus, whose secretary he had been, Jerome went to Bethlehem where he produced a new translation of the Bible into Latin (which would be the basic Bible in the West for over 1,000 years).

St. Augustine (354-430), a younger contemporary of Jerome, was also highly educated. After turning from a life of sin, he became a priest, then bishop of Hippo in North Africa. As a theologian and spiritual writer, he had a massive influence on the shape and character of theology and piety in the West.

These two great saints, though, had a lively exchange of letters, arguing the merits and demerits of Jerome's new Latin translation of the Bible. Augustine suggests to Jerome "that you may occasionally be mistaken." Jerome replies, "I see no need to respond to the honeyed compliments with which you try to sugarcoat your censure of my opinions." In fact, Jerome seems to have had trouble getting along not only with Augustine but with others as well! He called St. Ambrose "an ugly crow" who "decked himself out in peacock feathers!"



BERNARD & WILLIAM

In the Middle Ages, St.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was a multitasking figure: a monk, founder of many monasteries, spiritual writer, papal emissary, preacher, promoter of Church reform. Meanwhile in England (in 1140), a lesser-known saint, William Fitzherbert, a relative of the king, was named bishop of York. Due to political and ecclesiastical complexities, he faced much opposition.

Bernard, adding his renowned voice to the opposition, was hardly a model of charity when he described William as "rotten from the top of his head to the soles of his feet." After being restored to his see, William harbored no resentment toward his enemies. He lived a

Question Box

1. Who is your favorite saint? Why?
2. Why acknowledge the saints' foibles?
3. How do we become more like saints?

penitential life and was much loved by the people. In 1227, less than 75 years after his death in 1154, William too was canonized as a saint.

What is a saint?

Is it ungracious for us to recall the all-too-human side of sanctity? Not really. In fact, it is absolutely necessary that we do so. It is not enough to describe a saint "as someone who dies and goes to heaven." They are saints here and now, or they will never become saints after death.

Indeed, saints are saints on earth, in and through their humanness. They have all the limitations of human existence: personality problems, failures, mistakes, errors in judgment, even at times sins. They are further limited by their times and cultures. Saints are not perfect, but they show us that a wholehearted Christian life is possible.

It is possible to love God above all things and to center one's life on Jesus and the Kingdom he preached. It was possible for the saints, and it is possible for each one of us. A saint says, "Look at me. If I, with all my problems, can do it, with God's help, so can you."

By the wisdom of God, one writer has said with a touch of wry humor, the Church has been enriched with so many saints that there are plenty for everyone to thoroughly dislike. Not only that, there were saints who thoroughly disliked each other.

But should this really surprise us? The saints can be successful models for us only to the extent that we allow them to be real human beings (just like us), living in the real world (just like us). They remind us that we are all called to be better than we are—more loving, more life-giving, more peace-making, more justice-doing—in the image of

Christ. And it is possible.

In the New Testament, the term *saint* often is a synonym for *Christian*. Christians are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to be part of his holy people, to be saints (Rom 1:6-7). In the epistles, the Christians in a given area are often referred to as "the saints" in Jerusalem, Corinth, Ephesus or wherever.

Perhaps we need to recapture a sense of this and not think of the saints only as dead people who were perfect. We are saints and are called to become saints more and more in our lives. It has been said that "saints are sinners who keep on trying."

Newcomers to religious orders are asked to study the virtues of the saint who founded the order they are joining. I've often thought it would be interesting for any of us also to reflect on "how that saint would drive me crazy!" We might learn some things about ourselves; we might also learn some things about the saints.

Somehow, I do not think the saints would mind. They were honest about their human shortcomings and need for God. It is we who shy away from the challenge of the saints: of growing to our fullest Christian humanness. None of us is called to be more than human; but we certainly are not called to be less. That is what sainthood is all about. ■

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