

INTRODUCTION

Saints are part of our heritage, revered figures of a Christian culture mostly created by popular acclaim until the thirteenth century, when the pope took over. Before television the cult of the saints once dominated the popular imagination. Since television they have been displaced by the rapid, fifteen-minute commercialized celebrities we idolize today. We note the difference between the two. While our present-day secular celebrities point to and celebrate themselves (and the products they sell) the saints point to or wrestle with “Something More” beyond appearances, or frequently “Some *One* More,” One who disturbs, beckons, forgives, and loves. They have bought into the “one thing necessary” that Jesus offered to Martha. Saints become mirrors to another reality. That’s why Kenneth Woodward is perceptive in saying that saints are those through whom we catch a glimpse of what God is like—and of what we are called to be.

Others have offered their definitions:

“The saint loves people and uses things. The sinner loves things and uses people.” (Sidney Harris)

“They give more than they receive; they give more than they have.” (Bernanos)

“The saints tell us that even in *this* way one can follow Christ.” (Rahner)

Finally, the always quotable Oscar Wilde: “The only difference between a saint and a sinner is that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.”

But Woodward remains right: saints point to another dimension of life that we are called to follow.

So traditionally we have our saints, but, in time, familiarity and sentimentality have done them in. Take, for example, the images of our most popular duo, Francis of Assisi and the Little Flower. There he is, plopped in our gardens, wearing a rough cloth garment with a rope for a belt and sandals on his feet, and he’s preaching to birds. He’s the icon of the devout, the effete, and the crackpots. Thérèse is dressed in her well-laundered Carmelite outfit with a cross on her arm filled with roses, and she is dropping down a rain of rosebuds from heaven. The result of these images is that one gets sort of sweet Disney figures with no hint of the radicalness of their lives, no hint, for example, that Francis, the son of a rich merchant, would stand in the public square, take off all his fine clothes, and walk away naked to embrace Lady Poverty. That’s equivalent to a well-heeled kid of today leaving his parents’ McMansion, designer clothes, Lexus, and iPad and going off to live with and to serve the poor in Appalachia. And there’s no hint that rose-dropping Thérèse suffered from consumption and depression and died at twenty-four, all the while unearthing the graces of the ordinary.

Moreover, in the old days, Catholics were treated to a litany of official saints heavily tilted towards clerics and founders of religious orders, a condition reflecting the fact that the religious orders, already having the inside track, had the time, resources,

and money to advance the causes of their heroes. As a result “clerical” spirituality was held up as the ideal, and the saints became those who were celibate, serious, performed miracles, spent their lives in church, and could hardly wait to suffer and die. For the average person that was a hard act to follow, much less imitate. Fortunately, today the interest in making saints has shifted to lay people, and indeed the Vatican has openly asked for such lay candidates.

And the appreciation of the saints has shifted too. Some saints were serious and did have hard lives, but, for the most part, we now realize that they were fairly balanced people, compassionate, funny, and free. Some of our popular saints lived a long time ago. Others lived recently, and still others are among us. We know they’re saints because they seem somehow to embody what the gospel is all about. They just don’t have the title.

The fact is, saints come from all walks of life and run the gamut of the seven capital sins, being perverse, prideful, lusty, jealous, greedy, and all the rest. Some live holy lives from day one, others are latecomers, some fall easily into grace. Others are dragged there screaming. Some plod ahead relentlessly though steadily to surrender to God, others have an erratic, on-again, off-again love affair. Some are noble from the start, others become noble after years of deceit and shame. But whatever their history, at least once in their lives, they heroically leap beyond their pride, self-absorption, and even the instincts of self-preservation into a fullness of sacrifice, givingness, and love that takes our breath away. Amazing grace envelops them, sometimes like a gentle breeze, other times like a storm. However it happens, we are surprised, edified, and impressed, impressed enough to call them saints whether they are official or not. Some of these saints (official, unofficial, and should-be) are in this book.