

Robert Ellsberg

## Saints for Today

Many years ago, when I became a Catholic, someone gave me a little Penguin *Dictionary of the Saints*, inside which, as I recently rediscovered, there is a short inscription: "Welcome to the Catholic Church. The saints are the best thing about us!" To this invitation I responded eagerly, though I needed little encouragement to study the saints. Already I knew that anything of value that I had learned in my life had come through conversation with people I admired. Similarly, my attraction to Catholicism owed less to the study of theology than to the compelling witness of holy lives.

Among these was Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker in New York, whom I met when I was nineteen and with whom I worked during the last five years of her life. Dorothy had a passionate interest in the lives of the saints. She talked about them as if they were personal friends or members of the family. It was through Dorothy that I came to know the stories of St. Augustine, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Catherine of Siena, and, of course, her beloved St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

But any reader of the Catholic Worker knows that the list of CW "saints" is much broader than the official canon. It includes peacemakers like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Franz Jägerstätter; philosophers like Emmanuel Mounier, Nicolai Berdyaev, and Jacques Maritain; writers like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Leon Bloy; activists and prophets like Cesar Chavez and Oscar Romero, and mystics like Simone Weil and Thomas Merton.

These were the figures who continually surfaced in our conversations. They were our companions and our teachers and we debated their relative merits with passionate conviction. Some of these figures might be candidates for canonization, but not all. Nevertheless, all of them disclosed something about the fundamental challenge that engaged the life and vocation of Dorothy Day: as she put it, to unite "body and soul, this world and the next."

These are the people who have continued to guide my own journey. Not a day has gone by without some mental reference or communion with this "cloud of witnesses." In setting out to write a book on saints my intention, simply, was to enlarge the conversation, to invite others to join me in drawing inspiration and challenge from the witness of these holy men and women.

## ALL SAINTS

The title of my book *All Saints* is taken from the feast of that name. It is a feast which reflects the Church's recognition that the number of saints is much wider than any official tally. There are many anonymous saints, recognized by only a few or perhaps by God alone. But the feast of All Saints is also a reminder of the great variety in the paths to holiness. Some saints were married or widowed; others embraced celibacy. Some lived solitary lives, others in community. Some had visions of Christ and his angels; others, as Dorothy Day used to say, merely had visions of dirty dishes. There were saints who were rewarded and honored in their lifetime while others were nailed to the cross. Some had a clear sense of vocation, while others spent their lives in an agony of doubt about their own fruitfulness or their ability to discern God's will. Some were brilliant; others simple; others evidently quite mad. All of them struggled to achieve the "one thing necessary," to obtain the pearl of great price, to conform their lives to the mysterious pattern of the gospel, at whatever cost.

In writing this book I had two overall purposes. One was to hold up the stories of many of the great traditional saints and to show their originality and their struggles, and to highlight aspects of their witness that speak to contemporary concerns. One of the problems with talk of "sainthood" is that it often tends to abstraction, removing persons from an actual context, and wrapping them in an aura of timelessness. For me this empties them of a good deal of their attraction and meaning. I believe their interest lies not in having achieved some static quality called "sainthood" but in their very particular struggles to be faithful in the circumstances and context of their time and culture.

But I had another purpose, as well. By exploring a range of lives far beyond the official canon of saints I hoped to expand the popular understanding of holiness itself. The official process of naming saints has the effect all too often of imposing a stereotypical pattern on holiness. It encourages the view that the saint is somehow completely "other," a perfect person, who conforms to some predetermined ideal. I think that people's actual lives reveal ideals and virtues that we could not always define in advance. I also think that we can discern the face of God refracted in the features of men and women who were not completely virtuous or admirable, who were not completely orthodox, and certainly among those who were not Catholic or even Christian, and who nevertheless test and challenge our own faithfulness.

And so in this book I have joined potential candidates for canonization like Romero and Mother Teresa with more surprising selections: Oscar Schindler, Vincent van Gogh, Albert Camus, Mozart, and Henry David Thoreau. While any particular choice might raise eyebrows, I believe there is an aesthetic and moral logic to the work as a whole so that

each note contributes to the overall harmony. It was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who observed that “everything that rises must converge.” If that is so, then perhaps from the perspective of eternity there is more in common among these disparate seekers and witnesses than their evident differences and disagreements would suggest.

Among other things they shared a determination to find their own distinctive vocation. Reduced to variations of stained glass, the saints may appear to have conformed to one or another established religious type: the ascetic, the contemplative, the mystic, the martyr, the bishop. But a closer look at the great saints—whether Dominic or Teresa of Avila or Vincent de Paul—shows the struggles they undertook to find a path of faithfulness that was appropriate to their time. So many of the saints are remembered as founders of religious orders that we tend to think of them as “institutional” types. But in their own time what distinguished them was their intuition of some new way of discipleship or religious life that departed from all of the available options. They were actually “anti-institutional” in relation to the given structures of their time. Similarly, so many of the great “doctors” of the Church—whether Teresa of Avila or Thomas Aquinas—are renowned not because of their mastery of the established program of theology but because they enabled the Church to understand the gospel in new ways. Such originality left them vulnerable to charges of heterodoxy or worse.

#### SAINTLINESS FOR THE PRESENT MOMENT

In compiling this book I was guided by a comment of Simone Weil, one of the paradoxical religious figures who appears in my calendar: “Today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint; but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment.” Others have made similar remarks. As Charles Péguy wrote, “There have been saints of all sorts, but today perhaps there is need for a new kind of saint,” the saint who combines the mystical and the political. An obvious example is Dorothy Day, who wrote of her attraction, as a child, to the stories of the saints and their heroic charity. But where, she asked, were the saints to transform the social order, not merely to bind up the victims of injustice? Dorothy Day is a figure who joined the practice of charity with a radical passion for justice and peace. This innovation is one example of the type of holiness that is required of our time.

It is often remarked that the official calendar of saints is woefully deficient in examples of lay holiness. Ostensibly the Church has discarded a two-tiered spirituality that differentiates between the consecrated “religious world” of priests and nuns and the inferior world of family life and secular work. But clerical and monastic models of holiness still predominate. Even those occasional lay people who are canonized tend to be indistinguishable from monks or nuns. I maintain that we need

more models of holiness drawn from the worlds of scholarship, political struggle, literary and artistic life, the ordinary worlds in which most people find themselves.

We have had abundant models of holiness that fostered disdain for the body, for women, for the earth. We have had saints who embodied the prevailing chauvinism toward people of other cultures, other races, other religious paths. We have had saints who granted license to holy war and the denial of liberty, even to their fellow Christians. That was then, we might say, and this is now. All the more reason to look more broadly at the models of holiness necessary for our time.

If these are some of the concerns I brought to my reflections on the saints, I would like to note some of the lessons I have taken away.

#### A NEW APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN HISTORY

The standard history of Christianity focuses on the fortunes of institutions or the development of doctrine and theology. My book offers a somewhat different approach, focusing instead on holy lives. The result is, in part, an informal examination of the "Christian ideal" as it has been embodied in various and disparate forms. But at the same time what emerges from this perspective is a history of Christianity that emphasizes the constant dialogue between the gospel and new cultural, intellectual, and political horizons.

A parallel to this approach is found in the work of Andrew Walls and those scholars who have recently opened up the study of "world Christianity." In this perspective, the history of Christianity is seen as a progressive translation of the faith into new cultural idioms. It is a history that begins with the translation of the gospel from its Jewish origins into terms comprehensible to a wider gentile audience. But what follows is not simply an unvaried era of Western Christianity. There were equally significant trajectories of Eastern Christianity, while missionary saints like Boniface and Patrick went on to translate the gospel once again in terms comprehensible to the emerging tribes and peoples of Europe. The same process occurred with the missionary expansion of Christianity in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. In each case it was not simply a matter of implanting a single uniform brand of Christianity. There was always a more complicated dialogue between Christianity and the local culture. And in each case new accents, new potentialities of the gospel were uncovered.

One might say that the saints are those individuals who strive to incarnate the Christian ideal in relation to the questions, challenges, and needs of their particular time. I confess that I am particularly attracted to those figures on the frontier, those who probed new possibilities, who resonated with ancient and forgotten notes of the gospel and applied them to new situations. For example:

Holy women who devised original styles of religious life, apart from the options posed by their societies or the Church of their time. (See Mary Magdalene, Prisca, Marcella, and Paula in the early centuries; Clare, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg and the Beguines; Mary Ward, Sor Juana, Louise de Marillac, Cornelia Connelly, Mother Maria Skobtsova, Thea Bowman.) Missionaries like Matteo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili, pioneers of inculturation in Asia, or their modern counterparts like Vincent Lebbe, Bede Griffiths, or Anthony de Mello, who have tried not only to translate the faith in terms of Asian wisdom but also to convey to the West some sense of the spiritual richness of the East.

Liberal Catholics of the nineteenth and early twentieth century who tried to effect some reconciliation between the Church and the positive features of the Enlightenment—including the spirit of democracy, human rights, critical reason, historical consciousness. This would include figures like Lord Acton, Lacordaire, Frederic Ozanam, Marc Sangnier, and Modernist scholars like Baron von Hügel. Peacemakers like Erasmus, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day, as well as modern prophets and martyrs who have resonated with the gospel themes of liberation and social justice: figures like Dom Helder Camara, Pedro Arrupe, Oscar Romero, Ignacio Ellacuria, Stanley Rother, Maura Clarke and the martyred North American churchwomen in El Salvador.

It may seem that it is a special challenge to discern the meaning of the faith for our “postmodern age.” But it is no more difficult than the task that faced St. Augustine with the fall of the Roman Empire, or St. Francis of Assisi, or St. Ignatius Loyola. Those who today try to interpret the gospel in terms of existentialism or Marxism, the insights of feminism, Eastern philosophy, evolution, or quantum physics, are doing no more than what Clement of Alexandria attempted with Hellenistic philosophy, or Thomas Aquinas with the pagan philosophy of Aristotle—convinced that whatever is true is of God.

#### A NEW APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

Reflection on the saints also makes its contribution to the emerging field of narrative theology. We are becoming aware of the fact that stories, by virtue of their very structure, disclose meanings that cannot simply be reduced to a simple “moral” or lesson. There is a dimension of mystery that is not exhausted by the pat interpretation. Jesus himself chose to teach through parables, and clearly stories like the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son tell us more about the meaning of charity, repentance, or the love of God than many a sermon or theological tome.

The most potent vehicle for communicating the message of Christ has, in fact, been the gospel narratives themselves. The four Gospels do

not simply relate the teachings of Jesus; they set his teachings in the context of a life, a story of relationships and conflicts, a story of suffering, death, and ultimate vindication. That story, repeated over two millennia, has had the power to transform countless lives. It has that power still. And it reminds us that ultimately Christianity is not a matter of gnostic truths or logical syllogisms, but a challenge to enter into the logic of that story—to see and understand one’s own life in its light.

Many of the figures in my book undertook such an explicit self-examination. They saw their own lives as a kind of text, in whose composition they discerned the hand of Providence. St. Augustine in his *Confessions* was the first to adopt this project, with immense implications for subsequent theology. Augustine’s insight was that one’s own experience, one’s own psychology, might be the starting point for theological reflection.

Others in this tradition would include Pascal, Teresa of Avila, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Simone Weil, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Henri Nouwen. It was not narcissism that motivated these writers to tell their own stories. To be sure, they believed that the meaning of their lives was comprehensible in terms of God’s story of Jesus. But they did not believe this set them apart from all other people. Rather, they hoped to awaken readers to the fact that all our lives are illuminated by the same source.

The stories of the saints encourage us to examine our own lives in this light, to discern our own vocation, to understand the ways we are being challenged to respond more radically to God’s invitation. As Jean-Pierre de Caussade wrote: “The Holy Spirit writes no more gospels except in our hearts. All we do from moment to moment is live this new gospel of the Holy Spirit. We, if we are holy, are the paper; our sufferings and our actions are the ink. The workings of the Holy Spirit are his pen, and with it he writes a living gospel.”

The lessons of the saints are not contained in a set of “teachings.” It is the saint’s life itself that is our text, that offers meanings and mysteries that are never fully exhausted, and that reverberate with possibility and challenge even across the distance of centuries. Surely the message of St. Francis of Assisi is inseparable from his story. The same is true for St. Thomas More or St. Edith Stein.

At what point in a person’s life do we determine that he or she “became” a saint? In some cases we detect a certain temperament, an instinct or appetite for the absolute that awaited the propitious circumstance: the obstacle that summoned untapped determination, the crisis that inspired invention, or the “chance” meeting that opened unseen doors. In other cases an incremental, all but invisible evolution in virtue results in a qualitative distinction between the saint and her contemporaries.

Where do we find the meaning of such a story? Is it on the last page, or the wisdom of a deathbed utterance? I think it is found in the story itself—a story that is not just about moments of religious exaltation, but that is also about loneliness, the restless search for a vocation, the experience of misunderstanding, friendship, failure, and the will to persevere in the face of all that and more.

#### A NEW APPROACH TO HOLINESS

Half of the figures in my book are officially recognized saints. Many others, like Mother Teresa, Pope John XXIII, John Henry Newman, or Padre Pio are plausible candidates for canonization. But my book invites readers to consider the distinctive “holiness” of many men and women far beyond the restrictive canons of the Church. To what extent can we say that these figures, and others like them, perform the “function” of saints? Indeed, what are the functions of a saint? Throughout much of Christian history the saint has been someone who was pretty much ignored in life and afterward venerated as a heavenly patron. But there is another tradition which sees in the saint a witness to God’s mercy and justice; a mediating figure of the many paths of discipleship; an example, in Alban Butler’s words, of the gospel “clothed as it were in a body”; a reminder, in short, of God. Such reminders take many forms.

Most readers—even Catholics—need little persuading that holiness is not the exclusive possession of the Catholic Church. Doubtless our faith may be nourished and sustained by examples of love and courage and virtue wherever they are found. Jesus himself so frequently drew on examples of Samaritans and others beyond his own Jewish family to highlight the meaning of faith or charity. Indeed, in one memorable parable he indicated that our salvation rests not on the orthodoxy of our confession but on whether we have given food to the hungry or water to a thirsty stranger.

Among the most powerful stories in my book are a pair of very different contemporaries: Franz Jägerstätter and Oscar Schindler. Jägerstätter was an Austrian peasant and a devout lay Catholic who was beheaded by the Nazis in 1942 for refusing to serve in Hitler’s army. The fact that he was the single lay Catholic to pursue this course is remarkable enough. What is particularly striking about his story, however, is the extent to which he consulted a range of spiritual authorities, including his local bishop. All of them instructed him to do his duty and take the military oath. And yet, faithful to his conscience, he held firm to the conviction that any compromise with Hitler would be a betrayal of Christ. In many ways his witness conforms to a very traditional model of martyrdom. Like the early Roman martyrs he died bearing witness to Christ in the face of an idolatrous state. And yet the

idea of calling him a saint makes many people uncomfortable because it implies a judgment on everyone else, including church authorities, who let him die alone.

Then there is Oscar Schindler, the German industrialist who, during the war, made a fortune off of Jewish slave labor in Poland. Unlike Jägerstätter, Schindler seemed to live for nothing but his appetites and desires. But at some point he changed. His factory became a haven, an enterprise devoted to no other cause but saving lives. To this end he impoverished himself and repeatedly risked his life.

Jägerstätter may well be canonized one day. But what are we to make of a Schindler—how does his example relate to the company of saints? By conventional standards he was not a “good” man at all. Doubtless if he had gone to confession a priest would have scolded him about his adultery, his drinking, and his gambling. Who would guess that this “sinner,” among his contemporaries, would be counted as a Righteous Gentile?

In the Jewish tradition one speaks of the Just, those anonymous men or women who maintain some redemptive enclave of virtue or faith, and thereby keep the world from destroying itself. How important it is for us to remember such figures, to enlarge our memory and our moral vocabulary to include such men and women, to know their names, to celebrate their deeds. They are proof that the evil of our century does not have to have the last word, that even in a dark time there remains a candle light of courage and virtue. In telling the story one candle lights another.

A common theme in the stories of the saints is the impact of an encounter with another saint—sometimes through a personal meeting, but often through reading. St. Augustine records the impact of his reading of the life of St. Antony. St. Ignatius credited his conversion to his reading of *The Golden Legend*. It was her reading of the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila that set Edith Stein on her own path to holiness. Holiness is contagious.

The Venerable Bede relates the story of St. Alban, who lived in third century Roman Britain. Though not a Christian, Alban gave shelter to a priest fleeing persecution. After listening to his guest’s testimony, Alban exchanged garments with the hunted priest and so faced arrest and execution in his place. A thousand years later, another priest, the Jesuit Edmund Campion was executed in Elizabethan London. His blood splashed on the coat of a bystander, a student named Henry Walpole, who was so undone by the event that he himself went abroad to become a Jesuit and returned to face his own martyrdom.

Young people, as Dorothy Day used to observe, have an instinct for the heroic. There was a time when Catholic formation encouraged all believers to aspire to such heroism, if only in the arena of sexual purity

and obedience to church discipline. The exercise of the will through fasting, novenas, and prayer reminded ordinary believers that their faith made demands on them. Undoubtedly there was often a negative aspect to this, a tendency to compulsive scrupulosity, legalism, and hypocrisy. The Catholic rigorism of an earlier generation had nothing to teach Franz Jägerstätter or Oscar Schindler about the moral demands of their moment. Nevertheless the stories of the saints remind us that we are called to something higher and more demanding, that holiness is our vocation and the standard by which we must be judged. The stories of the saints, those who wagered everything, have the power to call us back to the life and death seriousness of the gospel challenge.

At the same time there is a sense among many Christians today that old models are not adequate and that we must somehow find our own way of being faithful. How important to discover that this has always been true. So many of the great saints in every age were pioneers, discoverers, who explored the boundaries, who imagined and lived out new ways of being faithful. As a result—long before they were canonized—they were often marginalized, persecuted, and accused of transgressing boundaries. In that sense too these figures may serve as heroes and guides, encouraging us to be faithful in our own way.

Not a few reviewers have felt compelled to note the many “obvious” saints I have neglected in my book. Aside from the fact that I deliberately limited myself to 365 entries, many of these overlooked saints undoubtedly reflect my own ignorance. But I am delighted if readers should be inspired to imagine their own lists. Let them include the friends and family members who have brought them closer to God. And let them correct my shameful omissions of Sts. Bernadette, Ita, and Christina the Astonishing. For my own part I have noted the passing of many servants of God who deserve to be included in a future volume: Victor Frankl, who shared the wisdom gleaned from the Holocaust in *Man’s Search for Meaning*; Bishop Gerardi in Guatemala, who was murdered after releasing a prophetic report on human rights; Paulo Freire, the revolutionary educator from Brazil who invented the word “conscientization”; Bernard Häring, the moral theologian, who reminded us that the law of Christ is the law of love; Fr. Lawrence Jenco, the priest who survived years as a hostage in Lebanon, and who taught his captors a lesson in forgiveness; Danilo Dolci, who employed Gandhian nonviolence to combat the Sicilian mafia. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

The canon of saints is obviously weighted to the past. But we have suffered no lack of saints in our time, men and women who exhibit qualities of holiness that speak to the present age. Naturally I would include Dorothy Day in this company. For her integration of charity and justice, her vindication of the peace message of Jesus, her contributions

to the lay apostolate, and her attention to the radical implications of the Incarnation, I would count her as one of the great saints of our time. This would be so regardless of any official recognition. Nevertheless, it was a great moment in my life to be present at St. Patrick's Cathedral in November 1997 for a special Mass commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Dorothy's birth. There, in his homily, Cardinal John O'Connor reflected on the meaning of her life, and her special gifts to the Church, and announced his intention to introduce her cause for beatification.

One of the factors that enter into such a discussion would surely be the fact that Dorothy herself hated to be called a saint. "I don't want to be dismissed that easily," she used to say. She knew of the tendency, when we call someone a saint, to put him or her on a pedestal, out of reach, belonging to some rarefied atmosphere that we cannot hope to breathe.

At least part of my motivation for writing this book was to challenge that attitude. I believe that the saints are our true friends and companions. What we experience of life, its terrors, anxieties, and sorrows, they too have known. They shared our weaknesses. They too relied on grace. They were those who went before us on the path to which we all are called. One could say that the vocation of the Christian is nothing less than sanctification, the task of putting off the old man or woman and putting on Christ. It is a task that is never fully completed, and one that easily occupies our efforts for our entire lives. Nevertheless, we are not alone. The saints, those who finished the race, remind us that there is a path to holiness that lies within our individual circumstances, that engages our own talents and temperaments, that contends with our own strengths and limitations, that responds to the needs of our own neighbors and our particular moment in history. We are not called to be another St. Teresa, or St. Francis, or Dorothy Day. We are only called to be the saint who lies within our capacity, within the imagination of our better selves, to be one of the anonymous company of witnesses commemorated on the feast of All Saints. God help us.

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