

All Saints

Heather King

When I told a lapsed friend I'd published a book about Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, she rather pointedly inquired: "But you don't have to be *inside* the Church to be a saint, do you?" I understood her concern; one of my abiding obsessions is the "unsung saint": the person who is *never* noticed.

But here's why saints are compelling: Saints are exceptional. Saints are *extreme*. As William James observed in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: "There can be no doubt that as a matter of fact a religious life, exclusively pursued, does tend to make the person exceptional and eccentric... It would profit us little to study this second-hand (i.e., conventional, ordinary) religious life. We must make search rather for...individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever rather."

So though in the general sense "saints" can be found everywhere, those who love Christ tend to be the most extreme people of all. Thus we have an eleven-year-old who preferred to be stabbed to death rather than yield her virginity (Saint Maria Goretti). We have a nun who drank the pus from the cancerous breast of her mother superior (Saint Catherine of Siena). We have a medieval scholar, regarded as one of the most magnificent philosophers the world has known, who at the end of his life regarded his *œuvre* and remarked, "All straw!" (Saint Thomas Aquinas).

I have my own personal pantheon: Saint Dymphna, patron saint of the mentally ill. Saint André Bessette, who achieved sainthood by humbly tending the door of a Montreal church for forty years. A new favorite is Saint Mark Ji Tianxiang, a Chinese layman and opium addict who was prohibited from receiving the sacraments for the last thirty years of his life because of this “grave sin.” During the Boxer Rebellion, in which Christians were brutally persecuted, he was sentenced with many others to die and is reputed to have gone to his execution singing the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

How capacious a Church that holds to her bosom female saints and male saints; saints of every race, age, demographic, IQ, livelihood, and walk of life! How welcoming the arms of a Church that embraces as some of her most precious children the broken, the fragile, the weak, the still sinning, the still in bondage, the still stuck. How emblematic of a Church of mercy and humor to take us as we are. How wise the Church is to understand that perfection consists not in ridding ourselves of every fault but in our capacity to give and to receive love.

In its original form, “saint” simply meant “friend of Jesus” (Col 1:2). That’s what saint still means. Glory be to God that the invitation is extended to all.

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