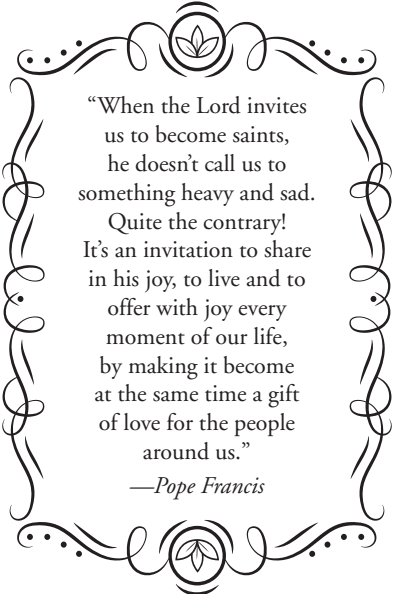




UNDERSTANDING THE SAINTS



STEVE MUELLER

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“When the Lord invites
us to become saints,
he doesn’t call us to
something heavy and sad.
Quite the contrary!
It’s an invitation to share
in his joy, to live and to
offer with joy every
moment of our life,
by making it become
at the same time a gift
of love for the people
around us.”

—*Pope Francis*

THE CHRISTIAN CALL TO HOLINESS

For centuries prior to Vatican Council II (1962–65), the common understanding of saints identified those men and women whom the Church had singled out as exemplary Christians and whose names had been listed in the official list of saints. They had been “canonized” and were privileged with the official title of *Saint*.

But the Bishops gathered at Vatican II recognized that through our baptism, each of us was called to be holy so we are all meant to be holy women and men—saints. “All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. By this holiness a more human way of life is promoted even in this earthly society” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #40).

While at first we might think that this was a new teaching, we now realize that it was an attempt to reemphasize the ancient mentality of the earliest Christians. From its very beginning, the Church understood the Body of Christ to encompass all baptized persons, both the living and the dead. Christ’s kingdom transcends time and space, and not even death can sever the relationship that the faithful



Saint Peter

have in Christ. All are united in a mystical communion with Christ (the “communion of saints” that we affirm whenever we proclaim the Creed at Mass) by virtue of baptism (1 Cor 6:11). St. Paul often addresses those to whom he writes as “holy ones” (saints) to designate all baptized Christians (see Rom 1:7, 15:25; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1) even the unruly ones (1 Cor 1:1-2)! And in fact the call to be holy in God’s covenant community goes back even further to the Old Testament to God’s instruction to Moses on Mt. Sinai to “Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2). Thus being in a relationship with God obliges us at its most basic level to be holy, to be saints.

WHAT IS HOLINESS?

Holiness is a way of describing “the inaccessible center of God’s eternal mystery” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], #2809). In other words, holiness describes what makes God divine and “other” or different from all creatures. It is God’s unique divine characteristic and has no human analogue.

In our normal way of thinking about God, we begin with something from our human experience, e.g., a shepherd or king or warrior, and by analogy we elevate this idea to its highest degree and apply it to God, who is somehow “like” this but in a superlative way

and thus “not like” it exactly in the way we experience it. But holiness is not something that begins from our experience but instead points to something uniquely belonging to God, what makes God to be divine or sacred and not something created. Thus it is something that cannot be created, controlled or co-opted by human persons for their own uses. It comes comes to humans as God’s gift (grace) through their contact and communion with God.

Thus as we learn from the Old Testament, anything that we describe as *holy* or *sacred* is so only because it has come into contact with God. For the Israelites, God’s holiness moved outward from God’s physical presence in the Jerusalem Temple where God lived, to other persons, places and things. Thus God’s holiness made Jerusalem a holy city, Israel a holy land and eventually will consecrate all nations into a holy world.

Since holiness is God’s defining characteristic and ours only through contact with God, Paul reminds the Corinthians that as Christians we are “called to be holy” (1 Cor 1:2) and tells the Romans “to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice (Latin: to make something holy by setting it apart for God), holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves



Saint Gertrude the Great

to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:1-2). Holiness thus has two sides to it. It draws us closer to God (our “sacrifice”) and at the same time away from conformity to the values and behavior of the world around us both in our personal and communal way of life.

FOLLOWING JESUS’ EXAMPLE

Jesus extends to each of us the call to “follow him” and to live in a personal relationship with him. But following Jesus has a double connotation. It may be understood as imitation (following his example) or as sharing a journey (following in his footsteps). In either



Saint Dominic

case, following Jesus opens up a new way of relating to God and to others. We discover this new way of living not only in the events of Jesus’ ministry (his parables, meals and miracles) but especially in his faithfulness to God even to death, which brings resurrection and eternal life for us who are in communion with him.

Christian discipleship is the way we live out our relationship with God and with others in the Christian community and in our world. Our spiritual lives as *Christ-ians* are patterned after the example of Jesus, the *Christ*. We strive to become like Jesus. As Paul described

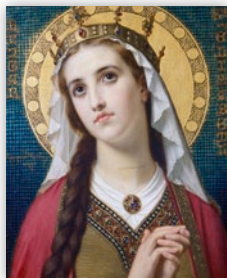
it, we put on the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5) and then are able to speak and act as he did. Our discipleship—our following Jesus—is a relationship that is based on imitation—seeing the world as he did and being the kind of person he was.

When Jesus calls us to come and be with him, he is inviting us into a relationship, as Vatican II reminds us, “not according to our accomplishments, but according to God’s own purpose and grace” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #40). This relationship has five stages. In response to our **call** into a relationship with him and our **commitment** to him and to this relationship, we assume with him the **co-mission** of building the kingdom community. This will demand the lifelong process of **conversion**, through which we take on his vision of reality, his values, his goals and his roles in service to God’s transforming presence in our midst. Because of the total investment of ourselves in this relationship, there will always be a **cost** resulting from our involvement.

Jesus taught us what our lives could be like if we respond to his invitation to become his follower by modeling ourselves on him. The imitation of Christ has been a fundamental theme for Christian spirituality since the time of Paul (1 Cor 11:1). Consequently, as we become more and more like Christ, we will become living examples of the gospel message for others—the only gospel some persons may ever read.

THE SAINTS AS OUR EXAMPLES

We are invited to be transformed by our contact with the risen Christ and the saints are examples of what we are trying to do. As Vatican Council II reminded us: “The saints have been traditionally honored in the Church and their authentic relics and images held in veneration. For the feasts of the saints proclaim the wonderful works of Christ in his servants, and display to the faithful fitting examples for their imitation” (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, #111). These holy men



Saint Elizabeth of Hungary

and women, clergy and laity, rich and poor, popes and peasants encourage and embolden us to live our Christian lives to the full.

Since a basic task of every Christian was to witness to the message and values that Jesus proclaimed and taught, everyone who gives testimony to the faith is a witness (Greek: *martyr*). The Gospel writers stress that the witness of genuine discipleship means taking up our cross and following Jesus (Mk 8:34; Mt 16:24; Luke 9:23, 14:27; Jn 20:18-19). The cross that we bear might be one of suffering, but it could also be the cross of plain hard work. In the early Church, martyrs who like Jesus died for their faith, were considered those who followed Christ most closely.

Just as Jesus was murdered by the civil and religious authorities, so the Christian witness to the message and values that Jesus proclaimed and taught often provoked (and still provokes!) persecution from their neighbors, e.g., the catalog of Paul's sufferings in his ministry (2 Cor 11:16-29), the stoning to death of the deacon Stephen (Acts 7:54-59), the murder of Jesus' brother James (Acts 12:2) and the thousands killed in the persecutions of Roman emperor Nero after the burning of Rome in AD 64, and in later persecutions under emperors Domitian (95), Marcus Aurelius (161–180), Decius (250), Valerian (255), Diocletian (303).

The early Church especially honored these martyrs who had imitated Jesus' faithfulness to God's ways even to death. Local churches kept a record of their own martyrs and each year set aside certain days to remember and celebrate their "birthdays," the dates of death when they were "born" into eternal life.

Their memory can still be found today in the first Eucharistic Prayer, which was the main Roman Mass prayer from the eighth century liturgical renewal of the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne. The prayer recalls the men and women martyrs "Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus, Cornelius, Lawrence, Chrysogonus, John and Paul, Cosmos and Damian," and "Ignatius, Alexander, Marcellinus, Peter, Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, Anastasia and all the saints." By the

fourth century many parts of the Church had set aside special days to remember not only their distinguished martyrs but also confessors (those who had witnessed and been punished for their faith but did not die), virgins and those whose example was especially helpful for becoming better Christians.

As the lists of these exemplary saints grew and soon included persons from all walks of life—popes and bishops, clergy and laity, men, women, and children (e.g., the holy Innocents Dec 28), religious and laity, single and married—they were collected into a book called the *Roman Martyrology*, the official list of saints venerated by the Church arranged according to the calendar. Additions to the list are made when new saints are officially beatified and canonized and their memorial days are determined.

THE CHURCH'S CANONIZATION PROCESS

Canonization (from the Greek word *kanon*, which means a measuring stick or ruler and thus identifies an official list, e.g., the *canonical* books of scriptures, the *canon* laws of the Church, and the *canonization* of saints) is the Church's official process by which a person is declared to be united with God in heaven, and thus an intercessor to God on our behalf and worthy of public and universal veneration.

For the Church's first five centuries, there was no formal canonical process as is required today. The process for recognizing someone as a saint was based on the public affirmation that someone had lived an exemplary holy life or died a martyr's death. The community's approval was enough to include someone in the list of saints because the general sense was that the voice of the people expressed the the voice of God (Latin, *vox populi, vox Dei*).

Beginning in the sixth century and continuing into the twelfth century, besides the community's recognition of holiness, the local bishop's approval began to be required before someone could be officially canonized. The process began when the community requested that the bishop recognize someone as a saint, then the bishop reviewed the request or cause for sainthood and considered the person's life and virtues. If the bishop approved, he would issue an approval that would canonize or list the person with the saints, indicate the new saint's feast day and formalize the official Mass prayers for the saint's memorial.

Starting in the tenth century as the Church began to become more centralized under papal authority, after verifying the evidence for the cause for canonization



Saint Therese of Lisieux

the local bishop would forward a summary of the case to the Pope for his approval. The Pope then reviewed the cause, and if he approved it, he issued a decree declaring the person a canonized saint.

This process generally remained the same and was officially mandated in the 1917 universal Code of Canon Law (and the revised 1983 Code). It requires both a local “episcopal” process and a Roman “apostolic” process. The episcopal process begins in a diocese when a cause of canonization is introduced to examine a person’s life and death to determine if they were either martyred for their faith or lived a virtuous life. The local bishop verifies the reputation of the person whose cause for sainthood he has received, ensuring that a biography exists and collecting eyewitness testimony and any of the person’s written works. This evidence is then forwarded to the Congregation for Sacred Rites in Rome for further verification. The apostolic process consists of studying the submitted cause, reviewing the evidence, collecting more evidence if necessary and investigating any alleged miracles. If the conclusions are verified, the cause is forwarded to the Pope for his final approval.

Since the current process of canonization can take many years to complete, there are stages that indicate various levels of official canonization: Venerable, Blessed and Saint. Venerable is the title given to a deceased person recognized formally by the pope as

having lived an exceptionally virtuous life or dying as a martyr. To be beatified and recognized as a Blessed, one miracle occurring through the candidate's intercession is required in addition to recognition of exemplary virtue. Canonization requires a second miracle after beatification. A miracle is not required prior to a martyr's beatification, but one is required before canonization.

Currently, there are eleven American Saints: Frances Xavier Cabrini; Marianne Cope; Katharine Drexel; Rose Philippine Duchesne; Mother Théodore Guérin; Isaac Jogues and the North American Martyrs; John Neumann; Elizabeth Ann Seton, Junípero Serra; Kateri Tekakwitha; Damien de Veuster of Molokai.

There are two American Blesseds: Francis Xavier Seelos and Sr. Miriam Teresa (Teresa Demjanovich).



Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

There are fourteen American Venerables: Fr. Nelson Baker; Bishop Frederic Baraga; Mother Mary Magdalen Bentivoglio; Fr. Solanus Casey; Sr. Cornelia Connelly; Sr. Henriette Delille; Mother Mary Theresa Dudzik; Bishop Alphonse Gallegos; Mother Maria Kaupas; Mother Mary Angeline Teresa McCrory; Fr. Michael McGivney; Archbishop Fulton Sheen; Pierre Toussaint; Fr. Felix Varela.

PRAYERS TO THE SAINTS

From the earliest times, Christians believed that members of the Christian community, though separated by death but now alive in Christ, were still able to help one another. “Being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven fix the whole Church more firmly in holiness. They do not cease to intercede with the Father for us, as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth through the one mediator between God and humanity, Christ Jesus. So by their fraternal concern is our weakness greatly



Saint Anthony of Padua

helped” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #49; CCC, #956). Thus the importance of the saints as intercessors for us with God became more popular.

The identification of saints as mediators with God introduces their role as patron saints, that is, one to whom we can go when we have specific needs that require help. Saints are designated as patrons or special advocates for nations, churches, places, crafts, activities, jobs, classes, clans, families, illnesses, causes, etc. Most patrons have been so designated as the result of popular devotion and long-standing custom. The Church has officially designated rather few patrons, and most patron designations,

especially more recent ones, are unofficial.

One popular form of prayer to the saints is the litany (Greek, a *petition*) which was used for a wide range of liturgical occasions, as well as for penitential processions, for visiting the sick and the dying, and for private devotion. It is a prayer in the form of a petition to the saint, and the response asking the saint to “pray for us” or “come to our aid.”

Another prayer is the Novena (related to Latin, *novem*, nine), which is a series of public or private devotional practices that take place over a period of nine successive days (or, by extension, over a period of nine weeks in which one day a week is set aside for the devotions).

WE ARE GOD'S HOLY ONES

God works in mysterious ways, and none is more mysterious than the gift of God's own life—God's Holy Spirit or Breath—within us. We cannot demand that God empower us with either physical or spiritual life. We must trust in God's love for us. God is always the divine giver, even more eager to give gifts than we are to receive them.

None of us asked to be born to our particular parents, in the time and place, family and social situation in which we came into this world. The breath of life that we have been given is God's free and

unmerited gift (Latin, *gratia*, grace). Each of us, then, is a living example of God's Holy Spirit at work. God gives life without asking anything in return except thanks. So we spend our lifetime giving thanks for God's gifts (no wonder the central action of our Christian lives is called *eucharist*, the Greek word for thanksgiving!).



Saint Francis of Assisi

But we must also recognize that our lives are not just for ourselves. As with God, everything we think and do is directed towards right relationships, which are also the work of the Holy Spirit within us. The Holy Spirit is not only the gift of life, but also the gift of love. The Spirit teaches us from within how to be lovers who will create Jesus' holy kingdom community that God envisioned from the dawn of creation.