# SAINTS, THE CHURCH AND PERSONAL PRAYER

*Robert E. Doud*

THE JOB OF THE CHURCH is to help people become saints.[1] One of the ancient names for the Church is the *Communion of Saints*. Another very ancient, indeed biblical, name for the Church is the *Body of Christ*. The Body of Christ is also what we receive in the sacrament of the *Holy Communion*: it is the communion, the community and the common unity of all Christians, local and worldwide. The Communion of Saints is the Church, and the Body of Christ is the Church. The job of each member of the Church is to help the other members to become saints, while joining them in the same process.

All Christians are, in some sense, saints.[2] We have all been cleansed in the waters of baptism; we have all thereby washed our robes in the blood of the Lamb, as the biblical Book of Revelation says (7:14). We, as members of the Church, are God's Holy People. But we are still sinners. No one of us on earth will be perfect until we die and go to heaven. In this world, we are all saints and sinners at the same time.

Many Christians, especially Roman Catholics, also talk about saints as those almost perfect people who have led lives of extraordinary holiness in this world, and who have been canonized as saints by a Church.[3] Some were considered to be saints long before there was a canonization process.[4] Thus, we have Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, Stephen and Agatha. We

[1] Karl Rahner, 'Veneration of Saints', *Theological Dictionary* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 479: 'The magisterium speaks of the significance of the saints when describing the Church as a sign among the nations and basing her credibility squarely on her holiness …'.

[2] Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'Saints and Mary', *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, edited by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, volume 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 156. Johnson quotes *Lumen gentium* thus: 'in various ways and degrees we all partake in the same love for God and neighbor, and all sing the same hymn of glory to our God'.

[3] The Roman Catholic Church has a formal procedure for canonization; the Orthodox and Anglican Churches also recognise and celebrate saints, and add feast-days for new ones.

[4] Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 50–52.

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**All Saints' Day, *by Johann König, 1599***

name churches after these holy people. Many others have been exceptionally holy without ever having been named as saints.

I always enjoy hearing the epistles read in church, especially when St Paul mentions his travelling companions. Today, it was Sosthenes. I often leave church thinking about these associates of St Paul. I am sure Sosthenes is a saint, although he was never canonized. Then, I think of Sylvanus, Timothy, Barnabas, Silas, Onesimus, John Mark and Philemon. If they were partners in the gospel with Paul, it is highly unlikely that they failed to become saints.

I think that the early Church stressed martyrdom too much. Of course, when we had so many martyrs, they would take priority in becoming saints. At some point in church history, however, with fewer martyrs around, monks and nuns started to be canonized. By now, there may be too many canonized religious and too few lay and married saints. We need role models for ordinary people today who are not called to die for their faith but to live it.

### *Making Saints*

To explore and to understand the idea of sainthood is to seek after the idea of holiness itself.[5] The Church is there to make people holy. To probe the nature of sainthood or holiness is to probe the nature of the Church. Canonized saints are exemplary people who show that the Church has done its job well. Saints show the Church to be the People of God, a pilgrim people, the Communion of Saints and the Body of Christ. The Roman Catholic Church's process of canonizing saints, while generally taken by Catholics to be inspired by God, may seem to be flawed in

[5] Rahner, 'Holiness, Human', *Theological Dictionary*, 207–208: 'Human holiness is an absolute surrender to the God of eternal life as he is in himself'.

many ways. Maybe the Church makes too many saints. Maybe it takes too long to become a saint. Maybe the Church misses some of the best people when it makes saints. Maybe it is not necessary for saints to have miracles attributed to them in order to be canonized.

We should all be looking around for people who are holy and who can be examples of holiness for us as well. Is there someone in my workplace who is not only a better worker but also a better person than I am? Is there someone whose participation in the liturgy and in the work of my parish makes him or her a person to whom I look up? Who are the models of prayer, community service and social justice that I can emulate? These people have characteristics of holiness that I can imitate as I become holier myself. To some extent, saintliness or holiness is in the eye of the beholder. The reason why the universal Church canonizes saints is so that we will look around us and see examples of holiness for us to copy.

### *Thomas Merton, Holiness and Modern Life*

Thomas Merton (1915–1968) was a Trappist monk whose life story and many writings are well known in the Catholic community, and far beyond it among other monks of other traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, and among people interested in spirituality around the world. Christian monasticism has maintained close contact with the roots of Christian spirituality in the early Church. Merton has become the best known, and perhaps also simply the best, interpreter and purveyor of the early church tradition of prayer and mysticism. He has provided many people in the modern and postmodern world with access to monastic spirituality.

I first read Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation* as a boy in high school. At college I often carried a copy in my hip pocket, and used to get together with a group of junior seminarians who would read it together after confession on Saturday night. This was in 1961 or 1962, just before the Second Vatican Council; after the Council Merton revised his book as *New Seeds of Contemplation*.[6] Some of us were also interested in Zen, yoga and the hip poetry of the Beat Generation. Merton's ironic view of the world and of worldly values resonated well with the budding interior life of the Catholic seminarian of that time.

[6] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 65: 'The more I become identified with God, the more will I be identified with all the others who are identified with him'.

A key notion in *New Seeds of Contemplation* is the contrast or distinction between the *true self* and the *false self*.[7] Each one of us has a true and a false self. Many people never get to know the true self at all. They manage to spend an entire lifetime living out the agenda of the false self, which builds an inflated existence for itself on strictly worldly terms.[8] Inside, there is a shy, hidden and unexplored region called the true self. The true self is a sanctuary in which God is always present, like a private chapel within ourselves where we can go to be closer to God than to our own breath. It is a great consolation to the monk or contemplative person that, even when we seem not to be praying at all, the truest part of ourselves is fused with God at every moment and everything else with which we busy ourselves is of secondary and finite importance. Deep within us there is a self that is true and real, a self that God creates, moment by moment, giving it love and grace. God calls to us ever so gently just to walk or sit in the realisation that God is there. A small and flickering candle of worship is eternally lit within us. The tiny space in which that inextinguishable candle is lit is the true self.[9]

***The truest part of ourselves is fused with God at every moment***

A saint is one who has managed to change the focus of attention, in a habitual way, from the false self—which never disappears, even in advanced sanctity—to the true self that is ever-present in perfect quiet and humility. John the Baptist said of the coming of Christ: 'He must increase, but I must decrease' (John 3:30). This is the wisdom of the true self. The Jesuits say *Deus semper maior*, or 'God ever greater'; the interior experience is of the self shrinking away before God. It is an experience of God becoming ever more wondrously, although perhaps also more quietly and subtly, present. Mary's prayer, the *Magnificat,* begins: 'My soul magnifies the Lord'. Glory belongs to the Lord, and the ability of the true self to rejoice in that truth and abide in that reality is the test, proof and joy of the spiritual life.

[7] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 38: 'This true inner self must be drawn up like a jewel from the bottom of the sea, rescued from confusion ….' Excellent subsequent material on the true self is found in Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame P, 1988), and in Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013).

[8] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation,* 21: 'It is when we refer all things to this outward and false "self" that we alienate ourselves from reality and from God'.

[9] James Martin, *My Life with the Saints* (Chicago: Loyola, 2006), 387; Martin quotes Merton as writing, 'For me to be a saint means to be myself'.

### *Praying with the Saints*

Sometimes when I am praying, I feel that Merton, or Bishop Fulton Sheen, another charismatic figure in the Catholic spirituality of the 1950s, is present with me. Bishop Sheen spoke occasionally at my parish church in Brooklyn, New York, and I always tried to be present in the sanctuary on these occasions, dressed in cassock and surplice. I still sometimes feel the presence of these men. I know others who feel the presence of Dorothy Day or Edith Stein.[10] I know a hairdresser who prays to St Rita all day long. An old aunt of mine enjoyed constant communion with St Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower. Some of the saints I know best are canonized, and some of them are not. I think that the poet William Wordsworth is a saint; I think that Gerard Manley Hopkins is a saint. I feel a deep kinship with them, and if I go for long walks alone at night, or in the day, I feel that saints and poets walk with me.

Eventually, Fulton Sheen became an archbishop, but we always referred to him as *Bishop Sheen*. He was a prominent speaker on radio and television from the 1940s up until the 1960s. It was quite chic among some of the café society set in New York during those years to become Catholic, that is, to be converted by Fulton Sheen. What was not commonly known about Bishop Sheen is that he was a philosopher in his youth. He had earned his doctorate at the University of Louvain in Belgium and he went on to become a professor at the Catholic University of America.

There were many Catholics in academic life who were dismayed when Mgr Sheen gave up his academic post to become director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith (SPOF) in New York. He was not yet thought of as an administrator and popular preacher. He brought a kind of erudition to preaching that was uncommon in his era, and he raised enormous amounts of money for the SPOF. As a child I loved to read the jokes in his little booklet that came to the house every few months. The good bishop himself appeared as a character in the cartoons.

It was from Bishop Sheen that I first heard of Teilhard de Chardin.[11] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit, was, in the 1950s, president

[10] Woodward, *Making Saints*, 139; '[Edith Stein was] a modern intellectual [philosopher] who had come to faith in the person of Jesus through the disinterested pursuit of truth'.
[11] Walter J. Burghardt, *Long Have I Loved You: A Theologian Reflects on His Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 35: Burghardt notes 'what Cardinal [Maurice] Feltin called his [Teilhard's] marvelous seductive "global vision of the universe wherein matter and spirit, body and soul, nature and supernature, science and faith find their unity in Christ" '.

of the National Geographic Society in New York City. Teilhard had spent many years in China as a palaeontologist, doing research on Peking (now Beijing) Man. He had also helped evaluate the findings of anthropologists in South Africa on early hominid discoveries. In addition, Teilhard de Chardin was a mystic. Even before the Roman Catholic Church had accepted the theory of evolution as scientifically true, Chardin had written theological works presenting evolution as the way in which God creates. Teilhard contemplated prayerfully the deep presence of God in matter as divine love shaped that matter into the various living species on the earth. His ideas were condemned by the Vatican, but his reputation for sanctity, vision and scientific honesty grew among Catholic intellectuals. As a college sophomore, I heard Sheen speak about Teilhard de Chardin with great reverence as early as 1960. I now consider both Sheen and Teilhard to be saints.

The writings of Teilhard de Chardin were extremely influential at the Second Vatican Council which, as we well know, changed the Roman Catholic Church radically and permanently. The Council was a New Pentecost that poured out the Holy Spirit in ways that may not be fully appreciated even now. Perhaps no one had more influence on the direction of that visionary council than Pope John XXIII.[12] For me, John XXIII was the greatest saint of the twentieth century. It was his incredible humanness and inclusiveness that set him apart from and above the rest of us, and at the same time brought him so very close to us.

### *The Saints in Art*

Another aspect of the saints is the inspiration they have given to the arts.[13] I think of my visit to the Cathedral of St Bavo in the city of Ghent, in Belgium. This cathedral is the home of a huge work of art, a painting originally created to go behind the main altar. The altarpiece is called *The Adoration of the Lamb*, and it was painted by Jan van Eyck (1390–1441). At the centre of the painting is the Lamb of God, standing on an altar placed in the middle of a field, surrounded by nature. Blood is flowing from the Lamb into cups, to be drunk as wine would be drunk,

[12] Martin, *My Life with the Saints*, 184. Martin quotes Pope John XXIII thus: 'The secret of life is to let oneself be carried by God and so carry him [to others]'.

[13] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-religious Dialogue* (Louvain: Peeters, 1990), 109: 'The philosophers and theologians … [are] demanding extra-biblical support for the [Christian] narrative … through philosophical or cultural [artistic and poetic] arguments'.

**The Adoration of the Lamb*, from the Ghent Altarpiece, by Jan van Eyck, 1432***

by streaming hordes of people who converge on the altar in long columns. The people are kings and queens, lords and ladies, soldiers, priests, nuns and monks, families, children, peasants, artisans of all kinds. There are also saints and angels; the surface of the artwork is extremely busy.

What the artwork depicts is exactly what the cathedral itself represents, a focus or destination towards which all humanity is called to come. The three great divisions of humanity—or divisions of the Church—are the Church Triumphant, including all the saints in heaven, whether canonized or not; the Church Suffering, or all the souls in Purgatory who are preparing to enter heaven; and us, the Church Militant, the ones still on earth who are fighting the good fight and are yet to win a permanent place in the Kingdom. All are in some sense saints, God's Holy People, participants in the Communion of Saints. We are enshrouded or embedded in this Mystery, and in the reality of this gives us our identity.

There is another work of art, also Flemish and also famous, that I would present as the perfect counterpoint to van Eyck's *The Adoration of the Lamb*. This other painting is called *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.* It is a Dutch genre painting, typically droll and self-deprecating in its depiction of Dutch life. The painter, Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1525–1569), pictures the boy Icarus, who has fallen from the sky into the sea, surrounded by many people, all of them going about their stolid business—caring for animals, ploughing, driving a cart along the road—none of them noticing that the boy needs help, or that this lad has accomplished

**Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1555***

something no one else has ever done. He has flown close enough to the sun for it to melt the wax holding his wings together and cause him to fall to earth before them. They fail, or they refuse, to be surprised, impressed or enchanted by anything that confronts them. They are like some people in the modern and postmodern world who are unable to notice the marvellous and the miraculous, the mystery of being and life that surrounds them.

There is a famous poem by W. H. Auden called 'Musée des Beaux Arts'. This poem reflects on two of Bruegel's paintings, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and *Census at Bethlehem*, both of which hang in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Brussels. The first verse of Auden's poem is about *Census at Bethlehem*. This painting pictures a pregnant Mary, with Joseph, awaiting her turn to seek admission to an inn. As with the boy Icarus in the other painting, nobody seems to be paying any attention to Mary and Joseph. The poem says:

> How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
> For the miraculous birth, there always must be
> Children who did not especially want it to happen, skating
> On a pond at the edge of the wood.[14]

[14] W. H. Auden, 'Musée des Beaux Arts', in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber 2007), 179.

**The Census at Bethlehem, *by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1566***

There is something spiritual in how we compare or interpret works of art. Allowing for differences, we see a likeness between indifference and disenchantment in the age of Bruegel and in our own time. Some people care about mystery and enchantment, and some do not. To van Eyck, perhaps, the Eucharistic mystery drew towards itself the members of all ranks of the secular and worldly community. To Bruegel, the worldly community had come to disregard the sacred and the miraculous. It is highly unlikely that the children in *Census at Bethlehem* or the adults in Bruegel's *Icarus* would ever line up to go and see, or join in contemplating, *The Adoration of the Lamb.* The special and fallen boy Icarus is like the slain and risen Lamb, but nobody notices him. The earlier painting (van Eyck's) draws out the meaning of the later paintings (Bruegel's). Van Eyck presents the reality of enchantment, while Bruegel gives us a picture of disenchantment. A spiritual lesson is learnt in the contrast.

We live in a 'destitute time', as the poet Hölderlin and the philosopher Heidegger say, because we have lost enchantment, this sense of wonder and miracle.[15] Enchantment, here, is the eagerness to see holiness in

[15] See Martin Heidegger, 'What Are Poets For?', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 89 following.

others and then to be holy ourselves. We miss a good deal of the goodness, even greatness, constantly surrounding us. We miss even our own goodness, the sense of the self as holy and as called to become more holy. The fallen Icarus can be seen as a powerful figure of Christ just as the 'lamb that was slaughtered' (Revelation 5:12, 13:8) is a figure of Christ.

The job of the saints is to re-enchant our world and our surroundings, to make us notice the divine agenda, which is all about *our* holiness, God sharing divine life and grace with the likes of *us*, human beings. The Church is the community of saints everywhere who treasure the reality and possibility of transparency to divine light and grace. The individual saints are people whom we recognise as having been personally transparent to God's grace and responsive to the will of God in their own times and places.

The real *communion with saints*, spelt here without capital letters—the (small 'c') communion or community of saints—involves awareness of each other, dialogue with other persons, welcoming strangers, noticing the new, the different, the wondrous and the miraculous, especially the extraordinary goodness, in the ordinary people around us. This is what making saints is all about: noticing specialness, noticing holiness in the great saints, but also in ordinary people, and most especially in ourselves. Noticing our own holiness makes us humble, because holiness brings with it the knowledge that what we have belongs to God before it belongs to us. It is a gift. Humility, then, is our point of connection with others; the communion, if you will, with saints; the togetherness that makes us God's people, a covenanted people. With humility, mere individuality becomes personality, and the person becomes capable of communion with others.

The feast day of a saint is called in Latin the *natalitia*, that is, the heavenly birthday, the day on which the saint is reborn into eternity—the day on which the saint died. Death itself is looked on as a birthday from the point of view of eternity. Just the other day I came across another painting, *The Death of the Virgin* by Bartolomeo Vivarini (*fl.* 1450–1491). In the background of Mary's death scene is a picture of Jesus as an adult and as the Risen Lord, holding Mary on his lap as an infant in swaddling clothes. It thus depicted Mary on her birthday as a new saint in heaven, where her earthly son is fully manifest as eternal Lord!

**The Death of the Virgin,** ***by Bartolomeo Vivarini, 1485***

### *We Do Not Pray Alone*

We think of saints as especially close to God and as influential for others in their relationship with God. They are also capable of an extraordinary number of close relationships with other human beings, living and dead. Saints are friends. They are powerful, accessible and helpful. Close relationship with God intensifies and multiplies our capacity for loving relationships with one another. The saints love us; they care for us; they intercede for us. They pray for us, whether we know who they are or not, and whether we ask them to help us or not. They demonstrate for us, in their exalted state, the true nature of the Church and of our relationships with each other in this world as well. We are all called to be saints; in some way, we are all already saints.

Having a personal and basically Ignatian[16] spirituality myself, I pray to certain saints in clusters. One of my favourite clusters contains Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, Robert Bellarmine, Isaac Jogues, Peter Canisius, Edmund Campion, Eusebio Kino, the North American martyrs, the Salvadorean martyrs and the English martyrs. Not all the saints in these clusters are canonized. The Jesuits Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, Walter Burghardt and David Hassel are also in my cluster. For me, they are surely members of the Church triumphant, and they are available for friendship and intercession. I have other deceased Jesuit mentors and friends who are included in my prayers as well. I am sure that their accomplishments in the world continue to shine in the everlasting Kingdom of God.

Saints are not jealous or envious of one another. Giving more honour to one saint does not mean giving less honour to other saints. Many important friendships in my life have been with Franciscans. I am a Californian, and the missions around my state remind me constantly of the Franciscan padres and their legacy. Hence, I pray to another favourite cluster: Francis of Assisi, Clare of Assisi, Anthony of Padua, Bonaventure, Juan Crespi and Junipero Serra. I pray with, for and to friends of mine, living and dead, who are OFMs, Conventuals, Capuchins, Atonements or Third Order Regulars. I think it makes my own prayer more powerful and effective if I link it to these contemplatives and missionaries.

Another community of spiritual friends to which I belong is that of the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity. Indeed, I am a former member of that religious congregation. Founded in 1932, this community is a new one in the Catholic Church, and has no canonized members. Nevertheless, having known the traditions of that community, and many of its members as well, I know it to be a channel of grace and holiness opened up in the Church by God. Fr Thomas Augustine Judge is the founder of that community and congregation. Sr Boniface Keasey is the founder of the Trinitarian sisters' community. Fr Lawrence Brediger is revered by Trinitarians as another saintly member. I lived for a while as a young religious with the venerable Fr Thomas O'Keefe. I often unite my prayers to what is called the Missionary Cenacle Family.

[16] Martin, *My Life with the Saints*, 98: 'The path of St. Ignatius means searching for signs of God's presence in the stuff of the everyday'.

When I pray, I do not pray alone. I fancy that myriads of saintly figures flow with me and around me in my own times of prayer. In my prayer, I share the joy and glory of the saints. I squeeze myself into one of my clusters of saintly friends. I remember many of the faculty who educated me in Catholic schools. I remember my own schoolmates and classmates. I remember my students and others who might have been influenced by me. I pray that the influence I gave others might be in the long term positive and not negative. I pray for blessings in the lives of people I may have neglected or offended along the way. The Church community, always at prayer, is a vast network of mutual enhancement that is based in patterns of exchange and transference between members.

The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles does not contain a very large number of statues. What it does have is a marvellous, elegant, yet understated tapestry that surrounds the congregation. On that tapestry, hundreds of saints are depicted in pilgrimage or procession, towards the altar. This tapestry, I tend to think, is like a twenty-first-century interpretation of van Eyck's altarpiece in Ghent. The tapestry was designed on computer in Ohai, California, and actually woven in



**The Communion of Saints,** ***tapestry by John Nava, Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, Los Angeles***

Bruges, Belgium. The tapestry depicts the Body of Christ in so far as it depicts the People of God who are members of the Body of Christ. It shows all the saints: the saints on earth, or Church militant, moving with and among the Church triumphant, the saints already in the Kingdom. It depicts the saints, not only as special individuals but, more appropriately, in their unity and community with God in Christ. The full meaning of the tapestry comes alive in the communion procession; we are all drawn together as pilgrims as we move towards the altar.

The Communion of Saints is a mystery of faith and a doctrine of the Church. It is also part of our prayerful and liturgical experience. We all participate in the physical, spiritual and sacramental body of Christ. The intimacy of that participation is far beyond what we as earthly saints can understand or appreciate. Receiving the Eucharist has implications, not only for a person's friendship with Christ, but for his or her growing intimacy with the entire Church. The most seemingly insignificant member of the congregation enjoys a rich participation in the holy mysteries we celebrate together. Going to communion in procession is a sign of our communion and connectedness. Moving in line for communion, I often say: 'He must increase, I must decrease'. In procession, the whole Church community moves as one body in one flowing motion; this is the Body of Christ.

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