

THE GREATEST CLASS

By: Joe Tremblay

So Different: Yet the Same

The Saints of the Catholic Church are a diverse class of people who lived in different eras and who are from different cultures. They are composed of men, women and children who possessed a wide variety of personalities; some were extraverted while others were introverted; some were known as being humorous and yet others were serious. Their stations in life ranged from that of royalty to peasantry; from the heights of the papacy to the disgrace of the excommunicated; from the rich to the very poor; from the intellectually gifted to those who suffered from learning disabilities; and from those who lived a long life to those who were called to martyrdom at a young age.



Yet, given this diverse array of personality traits, status and background, they were still of the same mind and heart. After all, they all shared one thing in common with Jesus Christ: the Holy Spirit! It was this same Spirit that breathed into each Saint a real ambition for God's honor, a strong desire for heaven, and a similar, if not, the same disposition towards virtue and vice. Remarkably, they were all uncompromising on the essentials- the things that really mattered - and indifferent towards the trivial and marginal circumstances of the day.

Falling in Love:

Chief among their virtues was that they not only loved Jesus Christ but as Spouses of the Bridegroom, they were "in-love with him." They truly courted him in solitude, prayer and meditation as often as they could. And among their favorite meditations was the Passion of Christ. For them, our Lord's sacrifice on the Cross was the very essence of divine love. But they also understood that the fullness of Christ was to be found in life of the Church. This is why they drew close to the Mass and to the Sacraments. This is where the life of God within their souls was daily nourished and built-up.

God is Everywhere:

To frequently experience Christ within the sanctuary of the Church is to better discern his presence in the world. The Saints were constantly aware of the presence of God, no matter where they were. For instance, St. John Bosco (1815-1888), a priest who cared for orphans, one

day came across three of his boys who were playing soccer. He asked them, "If you were told that you had three weeks to live, what would you do?" The first boy said, "I would immediately go to the chapel so I could prepare for my death." The second boy echoed the same sentiments. But the third boy said, "I would continue playing soccer." That third boy happened to be St. Dominic Savio. He died not too long after that discussion. What St. Dominic saw that the other boys failed to see is that playing soccer was very much consistent with their salvation. It wasn't that St. Dominic downplayed spending time in the sanctuary. In fact, he frequently attended Mass and also spent quite a bit of time before the Blessed Sacrament. Rather, he offered everything he did, including recreational activities, to God. As such, his path to heaven ran right through the soccer field.

Unconventional Wisdom:

Just as the Saints saw the presence of God in all places, they likewise saw each human being as they really were. Social status, class status or political status meant nothing to them. If the Saints were willing to reach out to outcasts and sinners- those of whom society tended to ignore or disdain -they were equally willing to rebuke powerful rulers and highly esteemed celebrities if circumstances required it. St. Padre Pio, who had founded a hospital for the sick and suffering, was also known to chase out unrepentant sinners from his confessionals. St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, inspired St. Augustine's conversion with his sermons; but he refused to allow the Roman Emperor Theodosius II, who had killed 6,000 Thessalonians in an uprising, to enter his cathedral.

These great men and women did not succumb to "group-think" habits and conventional wisdom of their times. If the good of the soul was being compromised, they were outspoken and mercilessly rude. Neither kindness nor severity- neither turning a cheek nor opposing an offender- neither silence nor making a scene -was off limits for them. When the interests of God were stake, they were uncompromising. Even if the Devil himself would appear to them, they would hardly flinch because they knew that He who was within their souls was the stronger of the two.

Beside Themselves:

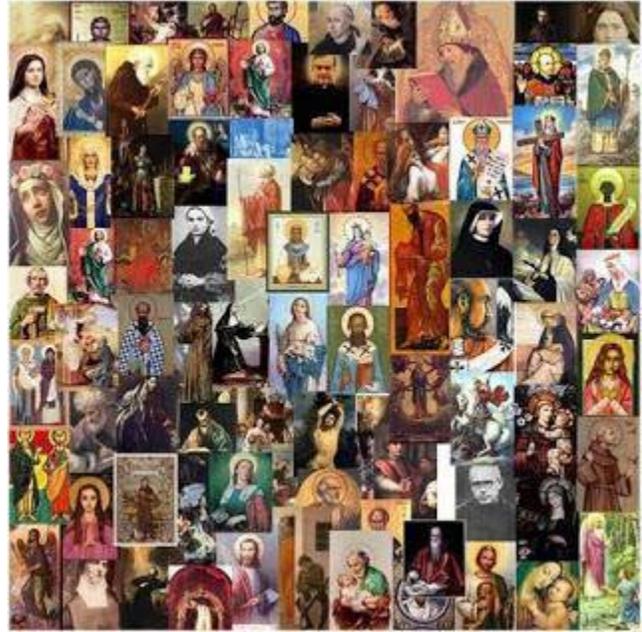
It is refreshing to note that the Saints did not take themselves seriously at all. With a cheerful abandon, they did little to hide their own faults. When they could, they agreed with their critics and laughed with those who ridiculed them. In the mid-nineteenth century there were some elitist priests in France who were determined to have St. John Vianney ousted from the priesthood because of his learning disabilities. They got a petition going and it eventually made its way to Ars, where the saintly priest was stationed. What did St. John do when it was presented to him? He asked if he could sign it.

The law of holiness is that the holier a person is, the more he or she realizes that they are a sinner. When the bright light of God is allowed to shine in the soul, imperfections show themselves. With this, the sinner sees himself as he really is. Indeed, we are nothing before

God's holiness. For instance, upon having a vision of the Lord of Hosts, the prophet Isaiah said, "Woe is me." Centuries later Christ told his Apostles, "Without Me, you can do nothing." No doubt, the Saints took his words quite literally. They were perfectly content knowing that they were the source of their own sins and shortcomings. Yet, whenever the Saints were commended for their exceptional virtues, they immediately gave the credit to God. Such humility gave them a levity that few people enjoyed.

Outsiders and Foreigners:

Many Saints knew what it meant to be outsiders...marginalized by the world. As with our Lord, not a few of them were even rejected by their own. St. Patrick was criticized by his brother bishops for preaching throughout Ireland. St. Joan of Arc was falsely accused and put to death by the Church officials of her day. St. Mary MacKillop, an Australian nun, was excommunicated by her own archbishop. And St. Alphonsus was kicked out of the Redemptorist order he had founded. In fact, he once said, "The saints have not been made saints by applause and honor, but by injuries and insults."



Knowing what it means to be an outcast- and at least in some sense, foreigners to this world -every single canonized Saint loved the poor and the needy. They felt as though they were one with them. Because of their own crosses, they learned to be at home with suffering humanity; that is, in mental institutions, prisons, orphanages, soup kitchens, the slums and in nursing homes. And although salvation and the needs of the soul took priority over the needs of the body, they never exclusively focused on one ministry at the expense of the other. Each individual, no matter how seemingly insignificant, was given special attention. Many people said that when they spoke with Blessed Mother Theresa, she would zero in on them as if they were the only one in the room; the same with Venerable Fulton Sheen. One day Bishop Sheen was visiting the church of his childhood in Peoria. He was surrounded by the press, the clergy and many attendees outside of St. Mary's. And in the distance, he noticed a woman who looked distressed. Her appearance suggested to him that she needed a friend to talk to. The good bishop excused himself, approached the lady and asked her to follow him. Apart from the crowd, she revealed to Bishop Sheen that she was in a "bad place" in her life. She confessed her sins to him, and then he resumed with the festivities as if nothing happened.

To Accept All Things:

Arguably, one of their most remarkable virtues among the Saints was that they accepted everything as coming from the hand of God. St. Paul once said, "I know indeed how to live in humble circumstances; I know also how to live with abundance. In every circumstance and in all things I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of living in abundance and of being in need." (Philippians 4:12) The Apostle understood that Christ joined humanity in its suffering by dying on the Cross. But he did this not to spare people from suffering. Rather, he did it so that people could suffer in union with him. Through this mystical union, every Christian could be assured that their suffering had meaning and redemptive value. God told St. Catherine of Sienna that his servants accept all things with equal reverence. Perhaps, this is why complaints rarely escaped the lips of the Saints. In setbacks, persecution and hardship, the loving hand of God was discerned. With the prophet Job they would say, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

The Greatest Saint: A Saint-maker

The greatest class of people the world has ever known, without a doubt, are the Saints of God. Yet among these exceptional disciples of Christ, one stands out above rest is the Blessed Virgin Mary. As St. Louis de Montfort said, God was glorified more by the 30 years Jesus spent with his Mother in Nazareth than if he had preached the Gospel to the world. Indeed, before the Lord entered into public life, his private life was shaped and influenced by his Mother. What she did for Jesus, she does for every Saint.

The Blessed Unintended Consequences:

Just a few things are necessary in order to become a Saint: First, we have to believe it is possible. Second, we have to will it! Third, the life of Christ does not end with the last chapter of the Gospel of John. The life of Christ continues in the lives of the Saints. As such, studying the life of Christ in the Saints will go a long way in spurring us on to the goal.

You might be surprised to learn that when these holy men and women sought to glorify God first and foremost, great things were achieved. It was from this quest that Christian civilization- the only free civilization to ever have existed -was brought into being. And it was from this holy ambition that the Catholic Church was renewed in times of languor. These are just a few of the blessed but unintended consequences that resulted from "seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." To be sure, countless people- Christians and non-Christians alike -benefited from the holiness of the Saints. And if we carefully look at annals of history, we will see that Our Lord kept his promise when he said that "all these things will be given you besides." When God's glory and interests were the number one priority of Christians, blessings abounded! Great achievements were made! Converts multiplied! And the City of God broadened its horizons!

