

*LAST SUNDAY WE CELEBRATED ‘ALL SAINTS’ – THIS EXCELLENT ARTICLE BY ROBERT ELLSBERG OFFERS A PERSPECTIVE ON THAT WONDERFUL FEAST*

## **The Saints aren’t Flawless—and that should give us Hope.**

My introduction to the saints dates back 50 years to my encounter with Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker, with whom I worked during the last years of her life. She herself has been proposed for canonization and is now officially on the first rung of this process, a declared ‘Servant of God’. Many suppose that she would have objected to this. After all, she is supposed to have said, “Don’t call me a saint. I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.”

This remark represented more than the humility one might expect from any actual saint. She knew that most people regard saints as perfect people—close to God, but not entirely relatable to ordinary humans. As she once told me, “When they call you a saint it means that you are not to be taken seriously.” Yet Dorothy Day took saints extremely seriously. Her speech was constantly populated by figures like St. Francis, St. Teresa of Ávila and her favourite, St. Thérèse of Lisieux. They were friends and companions, those who had found a way to live a Christ-centred life in their own time, and who challenged us to do the same.

### *There is something of the saint in all of us*

Yet, if Dorothy didn’t want to be *called* a saint, she certainly wanted to *be* one. Right away, this reflected the distinction between the relatively small number of official saints—the tip of the iceberg, so to speak—and the vast numbers of “ordinary saints,” including those known only to God. A saint was not simply someone in a stained-glass window or the name of a church. The saint, she said, “is the holy person, the ‘whole person,’ the integrated person. We all wish to be that.” She believed we are all “called to be saints,” as St. Paul said, “and we might as well get over our bourgeois fear of the name. We might also get used to recognizing the fact that there is some of the saint in all of us. Inasmuch as we are growing, putting off the old person and putting on Christ, there is some of the saint, the holy, the divine right there.”

If that is the case, we should look for inspiration not only to the canonized saints, the spiritual prodigies held up by the church for veneration. There are many all around us, perhaps not likely to pass through the canonical eye of a needle, in whom we could yet recognize “some of the saint...right there.”

Thus, among the stories of her favourite saints, Dorothy also appealed to a wider “cloud of witnesses,” including martyrs of the labour cause, peacemakers, prisoners of conscience, artists, philosophers and many who did not know Christ, yet would discover in the end that he was the hungry one, the homeless one or the stranger whom they fed, sheltered and welcomed. Of the Hindu, Mohandas Gandhi, she went so far as to say: “There is no public figure who has more conformed his life to the life of Jesus Christ than Gandhi” or “carried about him more consistently the aura of divinized humanity.”

As for the official saints, she felt we must depict them “as they really were,” as human beings like ourselves, who struggled to find their way and remain on their path. To regard them only as legendary miracle workers actually dimmed our capacity to imagine that holiness had anything to do with us.

In introducing me to the world of the saints, Dorothy Day inspired a lifetime of thinking and writing about holiness and holy witnesses. What is more, she supported my inclination to look beyond the stories of “official” saints to reflect on many other spiritual guides, prophetic figures, and moral witnesses. Such stories help illuminate our path; they enlarge our hearts and pose the question of what it might feel like to live such a life.

### *Unofficial saints*

I have found further encouragement for this eclectic calendar in the teachings of Pope Francis. His speech before the U.S. Congress in 2015 was organized around “four great Americans,” including Dorothy Day, as well as Thomas Merton, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. This seemed to support the contention that we can derive inspiration and encouragement from a host of people who are not “official” saints, but who nevertheless help us “see and interpret reality in a new way.”

Pope Francis greatly elaborated on “the call to holiness in today’s world” in his apostolic exhortation “*Gaudete et Exsultate*” (“Rejoice and Be Glad”). In this document, he begins by renewing the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that all the faithful, “whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord—each in his or her own way—to that perfect holiness by which the Father himself is perfect.”

In responding to this call, we are inspired by the great “cloud of witnesses” who surround us. These witnesses, he says, are not confined to the official saints but may include “our own mothers, grandmothers, or other loved ones.... Their lives may not always have been perfect, yet even amid their faults and failings they kept moving forward and proved pleasing to the Lord.”

Pope Francis notes that many of the official saints are bishops, priests or religious, which may actually deter us from recognizing our own call to holiness:

*We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves.*

### *Saints aren't perfect*

Even in the case of official saints, we should not make the mistake of believing them to be flawless. Francis writes: “Not everything a saint says is completely faithful to the Gospel; not everything he or she does is authentic or perfect. What we need to contemplate is the totality of their life, their entire journey of growth in holiness, the reflection of Jesus Christ that emerges when we grasp their overall meaning as a person.” Many of the official saints, especially those from earlier centuries, may appear strange or even off-putting in their rejection of “the world,” or their feats of extreme asceticism. Altogether, they reflect models of holiness that spoke to their own time and culture. As Pope Francis said, “Each saint is a mission, planted by [God], to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel.” Yet, still, they encourage us to think about the kinds of holiness that speak more directly to the needs of *our* time.

In any discussion of the official calendar of saints, it is impossible to avoid the preponderance, even in the modern era, of bishops, clergy and founders of religious orders. Given the resources and time it takes to move a cause from beginning to end, the advantage has always gone to religious communities and dioceses to initiate a cause and see it through to the end. But it is also true that the church has traditionally regarded those under religious vows, including celibacy, as the “saintly” class, as opposed to the great mass of “ordinary” faithful. Even today, it is exceptional for the church to recognize the forms of lay holiness, whether in family life, work or lay apostolates. The exceptions are generally martyrs and those who have borne suffering in a heroic manner. Additionally, the traditional canon of saints is woefully imbalanced between men and women. This reflects the same impediments as above, as well as the fact that the process of canonization is entirely overseen by men.

### *Heroic discipleship*

Nevertheless, I hope Catholics can recognize in many saintly stories figures whose holiness or witness was expressed not simply according to the all-too-stereotypical features of traditional hagiography, but in their wit, creativity and prophetic courage in circumventing obstacles; in claiming vocations and identities apart from those assigned by society or religious authorities; for doing what all saints do: demonstrating that a way of heroic discipleship is possible in all times, under all circumstances.

They share what Pope Francis called the true sign of the saints: they reject complacency; they go, like Jesus, to the margins and “fringes”; they exhibit boldness and passion. Above all, “they surprise us, they confound us, because by their lives they urge us to abandon a dull and dreary mediocrity.”

The Gospels do not speak of saints, but of disciples, apostles, people of faith and followers of Jesus. Jesus himself did not refer to saints but to those he called “Blessed”: the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, those persecuted for righteousness’s sake. These are not exactly the typical criteria for canonization. But they describe the men and women—whether canonized or not—I have come to admire.



**Robert Ellsberg edited the book ‘All Saints’ (Crossroad, 1997) from which, for the last few years we have obtained for our newsletter most of our Saints - or ‘Saints’ - of the Week**