Hidden Holiness

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FOREWORD BY ROWAN WILLIAMS

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Introduction

The manifest just are themselves sustained by these hidden ones. Moreover that within them which serves to sustain men belongs to their hidden and not to their manifest nature. All that sustains belongs to the realm of the hidden.\(^1\)

There has been an explosion of interest in saints in recent years. The cries and banners with the message *subito santo*—“a saint very soon”—during the funeral of Pope John Paul II come to mind. This same John Paul II was responsible during his tenure for creating more saints in the Roman Catholic Church than any other pope. Perhaps too the death of Mother Teresa of Calcutta tells us a great deal. The almost immediate emergence of her veneration and a very swift start of the process for her canonization are signs of this fascination. For years she was before us as a kind of “living saint,” there on our television screens and in media photos, like John Paul II. And (as we shall see) the publication of letters documenting her spiritual struggles have caused a sensation, provoking suspicion but also massive interest in what holiness looks and sounds like in a person’s life.

I will mention quite a few books that have done well, all of them about saints. This tells me that we remain intrigued by holy women and men, whether officially recognized as saints or not. Jesuit James Martin is an
author who comes to mind quickly. In his volumes are many great holy women and men from the past whose lives (and escapades) are nothing short of extraordinary—the martyr Joan of Arc, contemplative Carmelite nun and mystic Thérèse of Lisieux, Peter the apostle, as well as Mother Teresa. But Martin also chooses to look at some very complicated, yes, even flawed individuals from our own time, people such as social activist Dorothy Day, monk and writer Thomas Merton, and the priest and author Henri Nouwen. And what makes Martin’s books so appealing is the way in which he shares how the saints and other persons of faith have been important to him, caught up in the journey of his own life. I hope to do some of that here, although with much less of my own biographical baggage imposed on the reader.

We are much taken with saints but also put off by their feats and their seemingly unattainable virtues. But are we wrong in thinking this way? Could it be that we have missed some very important truths about saints? Orthodox lay theologian Paul Evdokimov reminds us that becoming a saint has little to do with virtue and a great deal to do with goodness, being like God. And everyone can become like God!²

This book stems directly from my earlier ones about holy people.³ In them, my focus was on the lives and writings of a number of figures from the Eastern Church tradition in the modern era. My aim was to examine both their diverse incarnations of holiness as well as their often provocative ideas about this. In particular I was interested in their ideas about the shape of holiness in our time, something to which each of them gave expression in their own actions. What follows here also flows from teaching religious studies and about persons of faith in our time at a very large, public university. With over a hundred language groups represented in the students and faculty, Baruch College of the City University of New York has been a kind of laboratory for me, not only for assessing what students of very diverse ethnic and religious traditions think about holiness but for listening to their responses to what holy people themselves have said and done. A great many of the accounts of both holy people and holiness in our time conveyed here have been tested with my students, as well as with groups at retreats and conferences, and with excellent response everywhere.

I have also “tested” my thinking about holiness and its shape with a number of very generous colleagues who were good enough to take time
out of their very full schedules to read what I had written and respond critically. I especially want to thank his eminence, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, for his encouragement and positive assessment of what I will put forward here. Likewise, I am grateful to Brother Patrick Hart, Brother Christopher Mark, Antoine Arjakovsky, Robert Thompson, Sophia Compton, Jerry Ryan, Carol Zaleski, and Frs. John Bostwick, William Mills, and John Garvey for their careful reading, criticism, suggestions, and enthusiasm for the project. I want to thank both Fr. Alexis Vinogradov, my colleague at our parish and a friend, and Bishop Seraphim Sigrist, also a friend and colleague, for many conversations that they will recognize here. I especially want to thank Sara Miles, whose own remarkable account of her conversion I read while writing, for her insightful suggestions and strong support. This book would not have been completed without the sabbatical I was given in the 2007–2008 academic year, and for it I am grateful to my chair, Glenn Petersen, the members of my department, the personnel and budget committee, and dean Jeffrey Peck of the Weissman School of Arts and Science of Baruch College of the City University of New York. I also thank those from the University of Notre Dame Press who contributed to the publication process, especially Barbara Hanrahan and Matthew Dowd. Finally I want to thank all those who helped provide the photos for the gallery in this volume. I believe it is crucial to have a face to connect with the words and voices heard in the text. While it isn’t possible for the gallery of images to be exhaustive, I have tried to provide images of many to whom we listen throughout the book.

All of the people mentioned above were most generous with their time and were especially encouraging about my striving for an ecumenical perspective in this look at holiness. The diversity of Christians from the Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, and other churches—both the writers and figures in this book as well as those who “tested” the text—witness, I hope, to my aim to be truly catholic in listening to the saints and following after them in everyday life. To them and others too many to be named, my thanks.

In this book there are a number of things about saints and sanctity upon which I want to reflect. One is that there is a crisis of holiness in our time. Is it possible, as a colleague has asked, to exhaustively define a “saint,” to specify what constitutes “sanctity,” over against the life and actions of a good person, say a remarkable humanitarian who is an atheist or an
agnostic? Can we call such a person a saint? I want to say at the outset that the “official,” that is, the ecclesiastical process of recognizing saints, either in the East or the West, is not my focus. The canonizing, or glorifying, as the Eastern Church also terms it, was there in the earliest days of the church, albeit it in a very local and less formal way. Kenneth Woodward and others have examined the history as well as the development of the ecclesiastical process, as well as some of its problems.

I will begin by arguing that despite the rather remarkable number of canonizations by John Paul II, many formally recognized saints, even well-known ones, have become distant from our experience and sensibilities. For example, one admires from afar, say, Mother Teresa or Padre Pio the stigmatic, marveling at their sufferings, witness, and wonders. Yet there is little if any immediate connection between them and ourselves. They are truly “larger than life,” sometimes superhuman and not really capable of imitation. The crisis is due, in part, to the increasing gulf between us and the time and culture in which these holy persons lived. It may also stem from the fact that it is not easy to find saints whose lives were ordinary. There seems to remain a penchant for what I will call the “cult of celebrity.”

Yet, as some of the persons of faith I profiled themselves describe it, there is always need for the tradition of the church to be living, that is, to be expressed and enacted anew in different historical and social contexts. In the Eastern churches there are those for whom tradition may appear “timeless.” The teachings of the fathers and mothers of the church, the canons or rulings of the church councils, even the words of the liturgical services are considered “unchangeable,” despite the historical record, which says that clearly this is not the case. The history of the church reveals that the very lives of holy women and men and their words are diverse, constantly open to new situations and possibilities, places and times where the Holy Spirit will blow as she wills. Paul Evdokimov has eloquently argued this.

Drawing upon Evdokimov’s work and that of a number of those profiled in my earlier book, Living Icons, such as the newly canonized martyr, nun, and social activist Mother Maria Skobtsova, I want to explore the shapes of a universal and more ordinary, and thus less noticeable or hidden holiness, one founded on the baptismal calling of all to be prophets and priests, witnesses to the Gospel. I also want to explore further Rowan
Williams’s insistence that people of faith find God’s work in their culture, their daily lives. I want to listen to poet Kathleen Norris’s ideas about a “holy realism” and Etty Hillesum’s learning how to pray. Likewise the prior of Bose monastery Enzo Bianchi’s thoughts about people of faith making a difference in our culture and world, Sara Miles’s beautiful experience of a eucharistic conversion and subsequent messy adventure of becoming part of the church, along with Darcey Steinke’s ruthless yet tenderly honest memoir of growing up the daughter of a Lutheran pastor and falling out of and back into faith. While I am leery of “how-to-do-it” literature on sanctity, we could benefit from listening to Alexander Schmemann’s very practical thoughts about the spiritual life. He was dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary for almost thirty years and became a kind of spokesman for Eastern Orthodoxy in America. I will look at some of the equipment for such sanctity, as well as the lives of several who lived a relatively unnoticed holiness.

There are many others whom I hope the reader will listen to: Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Simone Weil, Charles de Foucauld, Mother Maria Skobtsova, Paul Evdokimov, Mother Teresa, and some saints of hidden holiness I myself have met. I will look and listen at greater length to the lay theologian Elisabeth Behr-Sigel; nun and iconographer Joanna Reitlinger; a Yup’ik Alaskan woman of whom I am confident most will never have heard, Olga Michael; and Paul Anderson, the YMCA staffer whose name is hardly a household item either. Please do not panic at all these names! I am myself very bad at remembering names at first meeting at a coffee hour or reception or conference. Don’t worry. You will be more properly introduced to all these and more and learn from their own experience in living in and with God and one’s neighbors. At times I have allowed some to speak at greater length, in quotations, precisely because there is no replacement, in any commentary or analysis I could offer, for the power as well as the beauty of the firsthand expression of people struggling to live a holy life. I do not attempt to be exhaustive, but I provide a substantial bibliography within the endnotes, so a particular writer or figure can be followed up directly.

Who will want to read this book and why? I hope not just specialists in hagiography and the history of saint-making, and certainly not just readers interested only in Eastern Orthodoxy. This is most definitely not a
“recipe” book about holiness, but I will talk a bit about the tools that many have used in leading such a life. I will also reflect on what the tradition says about holiness, the theological background, in accessible terms. As so many in the “emergent church” movement insist, the first theology was in terms of stories and proverbs, parables and sayings accessible to all. I am among those who also believe, as do theologians Alexander Schmemann and David Fagerberg, that the most basic or “primary theology” is to be found in our prayers and rituals. Theology consists of words, thoughts, ideas about God. But these flow in singing and praying, in the reading of the scriptures and the commentary on them heard in our liturgical assemblies. But it is never just words that express who God is and our response, but very much actions such as washing and eating and drinking. And these require some very ordinary material things such as water, bread, wine, and oil, as well as sound, light, and color, as well as human gestures of thanksgiving, intercession, affection, and respect.

I have been turning over and over, for the past few years, Paul Evdokimov’s observation that the holiness of our time is at once quite simple and thus not so noticeable, most diverse and not limited to certain shapes with which we have become familiar. A succinct statement, but the questions that Evdokimov raises are most complex. Has it not always been the case that the churches have recognized heroic, that is, highly visible and extraordinary people (and their lives) as saintly? How does one begin to describe, to identify really anonymous, even “invisible” saints? And what are the implications for all of us in our own lives? It is just these strands I hope to follow here with clarity.

I should also say that while I did not intend this to be a reflection on holiness only within the boundaries of the Eastern Church, some of my natural reference points are there. I have tried to think beyond East-West confines, but I have also tried to allow some distinctive angles and perspectives from both the Eastern and Western churches to occupy center stage. My impression, as I have looked carefully at the burgeoning literature on saints, classic and contemporary, well known and obscure, is that most of the authors and figures examined are from the Roman Catholic or Protestant churches. While some of these will come into play and significantly here, nowhere else will one find the lives and words of Olga Michael, as well as several others.
Finally, I will admit at the outset that I raise more questions here than I answer. Scanning the recent flood of books in religion, one could conclude that there is a crisis of faith, with journalists and scientists, not to mention intellectuals, attacking belief in God and the actions of religious institutions in an unprecedented manner. Is this the reaction to the violence produced by religious extremists internationally? Is it a response to the demands of fundamentalists here in our own political system in recent years? Are we finally experiencing Europe’s allegedly corrosive secularism here in “God’s own country”?

Looking from a different vantage point, I would rather say that criticism and questioning reveal our concern for the sacred, our realization that we touch other worlds but most often pay scant attention to these other realities. I would agree with those who feel there is an authentic hunger for God, for the spiritual life, and for those who have lived this holiness well who have gone before us. So we also ask, how can this holiness be ours, how can we be saints?