MICHAEL PLEKON

Saints As They Really Are

VOICES OF HOLINESS IN OUR TIME

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

© 2012 University of Notre Dame
INTRODUCTION

Real Live Saints

Naturally speaking, people are filled with repulsion at the idea of holiness. . . . After the last war, everyone was talking about the lost generation. After this war [World War II] thank God, they are talking more about saints. . . . Archbishop Robichaud, in his book Holiness for All, emphasizes the fact that the choice is not between good and evil for Christians—that it is not in this way that one proves one’s love . . . but between good and better. In other words, we must give up over and over again even the good things of this world, to choose God. . . . It is so tremendous an idea that it is hard for people to see its implications. . . . We have not begun to live as good Jews, let alone as good Christians. We do not tithe ourselves, there is no year of jubilee, we do not keep the Sabbath, we have lost the concept of hospitality. . . . We devour each other in love and in hate; we are cannibals. There are, of course, the lives of the saints, but they are too often written as though they were not in this world. We have seldom been given the saints as they really were, as they affected the lives of their times—unless it is in their own writings. But instead of that strong meat we are too generally given the pap of hagiography. Too little has been stressed the idea that all are called.¹
The sometimes cantankerous, often discerning Dorothy Day wrote these lines in her column in *The Catholic Worker* in May 1948. A political radical, writer, the cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement and newspaper, and an activist for social justice all her life, she grounded all these commitments in a deep relationship with God and an energetic life of prayer. These words echo her notorious comment that many are fond of quoting: “Don’t call me a saint; I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.” Given all the wildness of her youth and her radicalism, it remains astonishing that then Cardinal John O’Connor of New York officially submitted her case for the Roman Catholic process of canonization on February 7, 2000.²

Dorothy Day’s “attitude” was not just her own irascible but compassionate personality once again showing. The problem is what we have done to saints—lifted them so high above us, made them so different from ourselves, so heroic and unusual that at best we can only admire them from afar. The universal call to holiness had been forgotten, as far as she saw it. But Dorothy knew better. Digging deeper into this is what I am about here. To do so, as will become clear, I want to extend the meaning of that line of hers about “saints as they really were.” This book is about saints—few of them canonized, all of them our contemporaries, and we have to number ourselves among them—“saints as they really are.”

This book proceeds from earlier ones as well as talks, articles, and works in translation, not to mention sermons, class presentations, and quite a few conversations. In *Living Icons*, I profiled a number of persons of faith from the twentieth century, looking for the distinctive features of their spirituality, their work for others.³ These were for the most part from the Eastern Church in the twentieth century. In a sequel, *Hidden Holiness*, I moved on to identify a much more diverse twenty or so writers, activists, and artists who embodied holiness without the patterns of sainthood of the past.⁴ Unlike the earlier book, these women and men were from various church traditions, and in a couple of cases not Christian either. But all were from the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Quite a few are still very much alive. What they spoke of and lived out was a holiness both everyday and diverse, less noticeable while nonetheless real and powerful.
To Whom Shall We Listen? A Shift of Focus

In what follows I want to move on from my previous focus on holiness and persons of faith, looking at even more ordinary lives and experiences, and looking from some different perspectives. Saints have a great deal to tell us about the kind of persons of faith we ourselves are. By this I mean, of course, those few women and men elevated by the ecclesiastical process of canonization, after popular veneration, to official sainthood. These are the saints of our icons, frescoes, stained glass windows, and holy cards. But I certainly do not mean just these canonized saints. As Kenneth Woodward, James Martin, Elizabeth Johnson, Robert Ellsberg, and others have emphasized, the process of recognizing people as saints—the formal ecclesiastical process of canonization—over time restricted the kinds of women and men who could be so recognized. The development of this process, both in the Eastern and Western churches, came to demand extraordinary things of saints, both heroic virtue and often unusual activities in their own lives and then miracles that could come under scrutiny and be verified and attributed to the intercession of the individual in process. Recently, for example, an unexpected and medically unexplainable healing is being used in the process for John Henry Cardinal Newman, and the remission of Parkinson’s disease for a French nun in the process for Pope John Paul II.

But I shall not primarily be examining individuals who meet the standards for canonization, and I certainly will not focus on what happens to their reputations after their deaths. I am calling the book you are reading Saints As They Really Are. I want to see what holiness looks like in contemporary lives by listening to voices of those seeking to live such a life in our time. But rather than pursue themes and values in the abstract, I have chosen instead to go to individuals, to listen to writers and what they have said about their efforts to find God.

Saints As They Really Are: Holiness in Our Culture and Society

I want to follow Dorothy Day’s lead: “Communitarians, we will find Christ in our brothers and sisters.” My focus will be on persons of
faith shaped in and by our time, culture, and society. All have written about their experiences searching for God and trying to live the life of holiness. Yet not all would call themselves “writers” in any professional sense. I want to listen both to their accounts of what got them going in the search as well as what put them off, discouraged them from it. I want to hear what lifted them up on the journey, but I am also interested in what dragged them down, what they found poisonous and destructive while living in their communities of faith. Without necessarily being conscious of it, their lives reveal their effort to live the life of the Spirit.

This will be an ecumenical endeavor. It will also need to be selective, because some figures, important as they are, have been the subjects of a great deal of study, for example, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Flannery O’Connor. My plan, for the most part, is to listen to voices and track lives less often studied, and perhaps therefore less known. I have some material of my own for you to listen to here, as well as my commentary on what these authors say. But my discussion of their experiences cannot be a substitute for actually reading their beautifully crafted writings—though I have tried to select passages that reveal the power of their words. I hope that the writings themselves will entice readers to go directly to the writers’ essays and books; the endnotes to this volume will help you find them.

I want to track the life of holiness in the experience of those who have been able to express all the turns and twists of this journey with clarity and beauty. Each writer will offer us something different. My strategy is to generously cite these writers, thus allowing them to speak in their own voices and giving us all the chance to listen and take their experiences to heart. More often than not, we will also hear about the details of their lives, since spiritual autobiography and memoir writing converge in many of the individuals we will examine.

I always field test what I am reading and writing with my students at Baruch College of the City University of New York, where I have been teaching for more than thirty years. With more than a hundred languages represented among the more than seventeen thousand students and several hundred faculty members, it is an understatement to say it is a diverse community of learning. In any class I teach
there will be at least a dozen ethnic groups represented and perhaps half a dozen or more different religious traditions. True, there are requirements for majors and minors, and optimal class times and days, but I find that every time I present women and men of our time talking about their search for God in the reading list, the texts are devoured, debated, and discussed with passion in class. So this book is aimed not only at those generally interested in spirituality but for use in courses that connect religion and literature, church and society, as well as the search for meaning in life in the twenty-first century.

Lastly, I found it made most sense to stay within the tradition I know best, Christianity, fully aware that there are many paths to God. As will be clear, however, I placed no boundaries and did not rule out questions of faith or doubt or points of view divergent from the tradition or the contemporary mainstream. It is an ecumenical collection of writers we will listen to—some from the Episcopal Church, others Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and a few who do not have a particular tradition with which they exclusively identify. Boundaries or defining lines may be necessary for other reasons, but because we are thinking here about holiness in the lives of human beings, and since holiness is a gift of God, something of God’s very self, well, then, there can be no boundaries except those that an individual raises for him- or herself. If a writer or a reader so chooses, so be it.

Writers, Voices, Memories

As will be apparent, I am not interested in simply summarizing and then criticizing the works of these writers. Rather, I want to invite readers to the conversation and reflection I have had with them myself. I want readers to be able to listen, to hear these voices in their own words—thus, the use of generous quotations from their writings, as well as the gallery of images, their faces. Mother Maria Skobtsova, herself a gifted poet and theologian, called the faithful, the people of God, “living icons.”8 She observed that in the Eastern Church liturgical services, after censing the icons of Christ and the Mother of God and major saints on the icon screen and the walls of the church building, the deacon or priest then bowed to and censed the men and
women gathered there in prayer just as those in the heavenly kingdom, the saints recognized by the church, had just been reverenced. Those of us who gather to hear the scriptures and preaching, to sing hymns of praise and thanksgiving and to share the bread and cup—we are not canonized, that is, officially recognized saints. Yet we are indeed saints because God made us in God’s own image and likeness, and in baptism came to dwell in us, and works in, with, and through our voices, eyes, hands, and ears. We are, at the very least, “saints in the making.”

I am convinced that as living icons of God, we reflect God’s presence in us in the unique quality of our features, as well as our experiences and actions. It is not so much that the writers I assemble here are models of holiness or even necessarily teachers of the holy life. Most of them are not trained theologians. Only a few are ordained to ministry in the church. Yet all of them chronicle their own failings and weaknesses. Each is the product of very particular experiences of family, marriage and friendship, of education, and, yes, of prayer and church life. Every one has a story to tell that is idiosyncratic and yet offers us new perspectives, different choices, deaths and resurrections. The motif of dying and rising, so central to the gospel, to the major sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, to Christian life, I discovered was a theme common to all of these individuals. It was there in their writings, whether intended or not, and it needed little excavation, surely no imposition or interjection by me.

I am privileged to have met and corresponded with a few of the writers surveyed here. I have learned a great deal from what they have had to say about their searching for God and trying to live a holy life. Most of them are alive and working. Not one would fit the caricature of a saint that Dorothy Day attacked in frustration, in the passage quoted above. None speaks officially for his or her church. It is true that the writers have a lot to say about their own lives, the people close to them, about experiences of joy and sadness, of rage and rejoicing. Is it that we will hear too much about the writers and not enough about God? Not at all! How else does God communicate with us except through us—our words and actions, our feelings. I do not hold up these women and men as models of heroic virtue or extraordinary holiness. Yet I do think they are people looking for God
and trying to live accordingly. Their attempts to write about their own experience are not to be taken as recipes. We shall soon see that most all of them would warn us not to follow them but whatever path we find before ourselves. Nevertheless, there is much we can learn from them. Struggling with discouragement and their own weakness, with both the support and sometimes the dysfunction and destructiveness of the church, these women and men have much to share with us. We will see ourselves in many of the situations and feelings they describe. We will also have sides of ourselves illumined, whether we like this or not.

Kathleen Norris is a poet, but also a student of monastic spirituality in particular and the spiritual geography of America more generally. Her latest book is an autobiographical contemplation of life as a writer, a spouse, now a widow and the adult caregiver to an ailing parent, and on the spiritual aridity and suffering that comes with aging, illness, and loss.9

Although I sampled their work briefly in an earlier publication, I would like to return to two powerful writers on belief and unbelief. Sara Miles has shared her own rich life and conversion and now her ongoing struggle with religion as she serves in a parish.10 The daughter of a Lutheran pastor, Darcey Steinke’s childhood was saturated with church services and Christian texts and symbols. Yet she saw her parents’ marriage dissolve and her father’s faith seriously challenged, and her own passion for writing and music took her far from her roots. But her memoir chronicles a recovery of faith that is most relevant to the religious doubt, indifference, and fanaticism of our time. Sara Miles, on the other hand, grew up without religious formation of any kind, her parents wanting to undo the upbringing they were put through. Nevertheless, her own experience during a Eucharistic liturgy one Sunday morning became an encounter with Christ that reshaped her entire existence. A writer, she is also a deacon and the administrator of the food pantry at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. In these spiritual memoirs, both writers share the beauty of faith traditions and communities as well as their toxicity, and discuss religious loss, recovery, and conversion.

Close to these memoirs are those of Barbara Brown Taylor and Nora Gallagher. These writers chronicle their journeys toward and
away from the ordained ministry, both, coincidentally, in the Episcopal Church. Barbara Brown Taylor has been an Episcopal priest for more than twenty years. But after a profound crisis, perhaps a “burn-out” in parish ministry, she has been a professor of religious studies alongside her lecturing and writing. The story of her failure in ministry is a courageous revelation but, as we will discover, most constructive, healing for us all. Nora Gallagher began but did not complete the process toward ordination in the Episcopal Church, and as she said in correspondence, she “continues to live in the space(s) between ordained and non-ordained priesthood, experiencing the priesthood of all believers.” Their stories confront us with what no one expects to find in the life of faith—not just what is wonderful but also what is destructive. Both, however, find their way through to a deeper, more discerning life in the Spirit.

_Diana Butler Bass_ is by profession a church historian. She has produced a fascinating look at healthy, creative communities of faith. But she also crafted an account of how her own life and a failed marriage took her on a pilgrimage through the American religious landscape.

_Patricia Hampl_ has written fiction but also specialized in the genre of memoir. While her memories of growing up Roman Catholic in the pre–Vatican II years are strong, equally powerful and beautiful are her accounts of “pilgrimage” in search of a faith lost, the revelation of idiosyncrasies of nuns and monks, and her discovery of silence and prayer.

The similarly memoir-like accounts of her youthful pilgrimage into Orthodox Judaism and out of it into mainstream Christianity have made _Lauren Winner_ a voice not to be ignored. She also confronts traditional teaching with the tough attitude and experiences of a young adult. She is by profession a church historian and is a member of the Episcopal Church.

The spiritual autobiography of writer _Andrew Krivak_ is likewise sensitive and articulate in examining what led him into the long formation process of the Jesuits and then out, into married life. Moved by so many of these honest accounts and nudged on by a couple colleagues, I will reflect on some of my own experiences in religious life.

Ninety-five years old when he died in 2011, Trappist monk _Matthew Kelty_ took up over the years all kinds of issues of our time from
war to sexual identity, social justice, and individual depression, not unlike his much better known comrade at Gethsemani monastery (and former novice master), the great writer Thomas Merton.

My own teacher is the well-known sociologist of religion and Lutheran lay theologian Peter Berger. He has spent almost a half century scrutinizing the American social and religious landscapes. In addition to questioning his own earlier conclusion about secularization in our time, he recently produced a most intriguing reflection on belief and doubt. His voice adds a distinctive perspective to those already mentioned. There are several others whose accounts will also appear, if briefly. The effect is a kind of chorus of voices, not blended in close harmony, but nevertheless singing the same song, albeit with parts that diverge as well as converge.

In the first chapter we will consider that we have become stuck on saints, but mostly the official ones—on walls and atop pedestals. But what would we find if we looked into the experiences of ordinary people instead? Official recognition of people as saints usually requires the demonstration of out-of-the-ordinary achievements both within their lives and after death. We will instead follow the road of experience, as suggested in Peter Berger’s reflection, Questions of Faith. A basic pattern will emerge in his look at what we believe and what can be questioned in the faith. A leading writer in the genre of memoir, Patricia Hampl, will orient us toward hearing from others working in that genre, tracking back through their spiritual journeys.

From that we will move, in chapter 2, to what most of us are first aware of—that our lives are a mess, that we are very imperfect people, subject to innumerable weaknesses. We are often our own worst enemies. We will listen to Kathleen Norris’s account of her own struggles with the aridity or spiritual emptiness known as acedia. But at the same time we will encounter other traumatic events in her life and see how she dealt with these. Then we will follow Barbara Brown Taylor’s riveting but disturbing retelling of her own path both in parish ministry and beyond. And we will accompany Nora Gallagher through the liturgical year and beyond as she faces the death of her brother as well as a rediscovery of her own faith in Trinity Church, her home parish in Santa Barbara. Part of this will be her experience of internship as she discerns whether to continue as a candidate for ordination.
In chapter 3 we will confront the reality that religion, in many different ways, can be toxic, that the institutional church can work at cross purposes to its ideals, that people of faith can do great harm to others as well as to themselves. Once again we will hear Barbara Brown Taylor on losing one’s calling and one’s way, from Sara Miles and Darcey Steinke on other sides of parish life, and from Sergius Bulgakov and Alexander Schmemann on the perils of clericalism and power.

In chapter 4 we move to the other side of what is toxic and destructive—joy in the pursuit of holiness. In the search for God and the effort to lead a holy life there is happiness, peace, and fulfillment alongside struggle and loss. Here Andrew Krivak’s memoir of his years in formation in the Jesuits will be a source, along with accounts from two pastors, Lillian Daniel and Martin Copenhaver. I entitled chapter 5 “You want to be happy?” This was the response from a wise and discerning priest to me when I was a very naive eighteen year old. Of course we all want to be happy, but this is just the start of the conversation. What follows is a remembering of my own time in the Carmelite Order as a high school and minor seminary student, then a novice and student friar. I want to remember Fathers Vincent McDonald and Albert Daly, among others, and many of the good things I learned and received in pursuing the Carmelite life of prayer and work. It is also necessary to remember some of the painful, not-so-positive aspects as well.

Another experience is that of searching for communion with God and with others. This we will examine in chapter 6. But sometimes it is searching in all the wrong places and being found by or finding God nonetheless. Patricia Hampl’s account of several attempts at pilgrimage, at finding the contemplative life and a life of the Spirit, is a very rich source to explore. Likewise, Lauren Winner’s account of her conversion experience, told with ample dollops of both Orthodox Judaism and Christianity, makes for the most unusual and extreme spiritual memoir we will encounter here, yet a very moving one.

A discovery in the path of searching for God is that God “is everywhere, filling all things,” as the Eastern Church prayer invoking the Holy Spirit puts it. This we will pursue in chapter 7. Darcey
Steinke absorbed this sensitivity to God’s omnipresence from her experience as a pastor’s kid, and it radiates not only in her own memoir but in her fiction too. Barbara Brown Taylor presents a number of practices in the spiritual life, ways of experiencing the presence and action of God in the everyday world around us. Listening to her again is in itself a fascinating counterpoint to her prior account of the toxic possibilities of the church and religion.

In chapter 8 I want to bring together the many threads of experience at which we have looked. Diana Butler Bass will be an important source, first taking us on her own personal spiritual journey, then taking us through the experiences and practice of some living communities, local churches, and parishes that have intentionally tried to grow, reaching out for God and for the neighbor. We will also listen to Matthew Kelty, a Trappist monk with the gift for bringing together liturgy and life, faith and work, the church and the world in his preaching.

These two voices and other conversations return us, in the final chapter, to where Dorothy Day’s comment launched us. No one finds God by him- or herself. *Solus christianus, nulla christianus*, in Tertullian’s words: “You can’t be a Christian alone.” What is happening to communities of faith in the twenty-first century? A great deal has already changed, even more is changing around us, yet with a few exceptions, most in institutional church positions either cannot see or do not wish to see these changes.

**So What?**

Peter Berger used to routinely throw this fairly ultimate question out at us in class as we wound our way through Marx or Weber, George Herbert Mead, Durkheim, Simmel, Freud, Arnold Gehlen, or Alfred Schutz—great classical and contemporary social thinkers. But in addition to this “canon” he would also swirl in whatever other authors he was reading, whether novelists or poets, theologians or political scientists. For me, at least, this was proof positive that to educate oneself, it was necessary to forget about disciplinary boundaries or labels, much less a particular “school” or approach such as “structural
functionalism” or “symbolic interactionism.” Like the very best writers, Berger was constantly reading, listening to new, different voices.

I think the “so what” was, at least in my memory, a way of bringing both research findings and theory back to everyday life. It was a question of what meaning or significance could this idea or connection have for not just the way I look at the world but for decisions made, actions taken corporately. I am convinced that it was a consulting of experience as well. Since this is not the first time I have pursued either holy people themselves or mere mortals thinking in their writing about the search for meaning, for God, I myself have thought many times in the writing of this volume, “So what?” While memoirs like those of writers such as Joan Didion, Mary Karr, and Elizabeth Gilbert sell and are read, and while there has been a small renaissance of interest in saints, is there really need for yet another book along those lines, like this one? I decided that there was, as the response to the “So what?” question pulled me personally in. In trying to remember and then record memories of the years I spent in formation in the Carmelite Order, I had the welcome admonishing of my daughter Hannah to dig deeper and not just describe events but to offer up what I felt and thought, what I still delighted in, and what I still was disgusted by. In so doing and reconnecting through Facebook with some comrades of those Carmelite days, I realized that I was not just proceeding as a teacher and scholar for over thirty-five years. I was coming to terms, even if in a small way, with my past and my present and not in the usual location for so many of us—a therapist’s office. I was coming to terms with pastoral ministry many years after ordination—asking why we continue to operate with models of parish life that are more than five hundred years old in a context that is no longer rooted in the agrarian economy, small town society, and homogenous ethnic communities in which those models were rooted. In all honesty, several years of grappling with the scandal of financial mismanagement and abuse of authority in my own church body also was pressing on me.

What is more, because the parish in which I serve always has seminarian interns, I realized I was helping to prepare young people for a very uncertain future in the church. When asked what I relied on, what encouraged, sustained, and, yes, also comforted me, I kept
going back to those whom I had read, studied, and written about: Sergius Bulgakov, Alexander Schmemann, Paul Evdokimov, Mother Maria Skobtsova, Nicholas Afanasiev, and beyond them those I actually had met and knew—all almost five feet of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Darcey Steinke, Vincent McDonald, Albert Daly, Matthew Kelty, and Patrick Hart, at eighty-eight, a senior monk at Gethsemani monastery, where he was once Thomas Merton’s secretary.

Thus in what follows, some of the ideas and lives that spoke to my “So what?” question I share with you—beautiful experiences of looking for and finding joy in the liturgy, the scriptures, in community and friendship within the church. But I had to include the pathological, destructive, and lethal realities too. And as those who know the ancient ways of studying the sacred texts, it was both necessary and good to end up not with answers or recipes but with numerous questions. To be disappointed and then be reminded of the likes of Mother Maria Skobtsova and her sufferings and courage, to be challenged about what the point of the all-too-human church is—and then to read the hundreds of entries of Alexander Schmemann’s journal, be slapped in the face, as it were, by Darcey Steinke’s strength despite what she experienced . . . So what? So there is a point to keep on reading, listening, talking, and living after God.
Chapter One

Bringing Saints down from the Walls and Pedestals

Dorothy’s Lament

It was Dorothy Day who lamented that we seldom know holy women and men in their authentic humanity, in the actual context of their lives as women and men, but rather according to their miracles, the extraordinary feats they performed, or their “heroic virtue.” The passage quoted at the start of the introduction is but one instance of her point of view. In her recently published diaries as well as in her columns in *The Catholic Worker* paper, there are many similar passages recognizing the universal call to holiness and the need to see the human sides of holy people.1 Robert Ellsberg has also edited her letters and the same holds true for them.2

Dorothy was on to something. It came out of her faith, out of her daily praying the liturgy of the hours and participation in the Eucharist, not to mention her reading, which was prodigious! Official recognition of people as saints often requires the demonstration of out-of-the-ordinary achievements, both during their lives and after death, upon their invocation by the faithful. Miracles during the saints’ lives abound in their “official” biographies—walking on water, bilocation, floating in the air, astounding healings of the sick, existing sometimes on nothing but holy communion.
Dorothy Day, of course, knew better. Her reading told her that great saints suffered doubt, depression, and all kinds of eccentricities. They could be nasty, impatient, forgetful, and clueless when it came to the people around them. Saints could be arrogant in self-confidence and learning or illiterate and out of touch with their worlds. They could also be quite normal, ordinary, and flawed. She saw this in great figures from the past such as Augustine and Francis of Assisi but also in a modern saint like Thérèse of Lisieux. Dorothy knew the singularity of sanctity in her brilliant but eccentric collaborator Peter Maurin. She also recognized the spirit of holiness in nonbelievers from her past. Even when she tangled and strongly disagreed she saw the flame of the Spirit in her co-workers and correspondents.

Dorothy’s own life was a weave of contradictions and affirmations. She never let go of the radical vision of social justice that was ignited in her youth as a political journalist. She criticized the indifference, the political conservatism and clericalism of her Catholic Church. Having had an abortion, several affairs, and a child who she raised by herself as a single parent, she found the sexual openness and rebelliousness of the young people who flocked to the Catholic Worker houses in the 1960s and 70s repulsive. She seemed at times to cling to her faith and devotional practices almost irrationally.

And yet as one hears her taped interviews and reads her columns, diaries, and letters, there were still other sides to this fascinating, amazing woman. Her diaries confirm what is also there in several filmed interviews—a rich, deep, sometimes contradictory personality. The closer one gets to Dorothy the better one comes to know a generous soul, a stunningly passionate woman emerging. What is telling is that many conservative Catholics find her objectionable, think her official cause for canonization misguided and inappropriate. But it is precisely the clash of characteristics, the flash of radicalism and traditional piety that reveals Day’s singular character. Her complex personality and rich life, focused however on love for God and for the neighbor, make her very much a saint for our times. The same I think is true of a number of others, including Thomas Merton. In Merton’s case, twenty-five years after his death in 1968, when his literary estate opened his unpublished writings for study and publication, an intricate, surely not typical image of Merton emerged. Audiotapes of his classes at Gethsemani monastery reveal a profound grasp of the

© 2012 University of Notre Dame
sources of not just monastic life but the wider Christian tradition—the scriptures, the entwining of prayer and contemplation with life, the crucial connections between the church and the world. And mixed in to all these were his own volatile emotions, his clashes with his abbot, James Fox, even his falling in love with a student nurse who cared for him in the Louisville hospital—the joy and the pain and the resolution of this relationship, and Merton’s commitment to his monastic vocation. When the full sweep of Thomas Merton’s humanity was revealed in his journals and letters, some who formerly regarded him as a spiritual master were scandalized that he was a human being, with great gifts but also inadequacies, weaknesses, difficulties. Recently Mark Shaw has tried to upend Merton’s figure precisely by appeal to these aspects of his humanity.

Years ago something similar occurred when it became clear that there were different versions of the diaries and letters of Thérèse of Lisieux, the censored version and the unexpurgated, the latter of which revealed, again, the humanity of their author. Almost a decade ago the publication in English translation of selections from the journal kept by Alexander Schmemann, the Orthodox priest and theologian, in the last ten years of his life offered a fascinating portrait of this gifted man. But this has more recently been countered by the release, both in the original Russian language and in French translation, of a more complete version of the journal. Not surprisingly, there are sides of Schmemann here not previously known: a harsh critic of many things in the church, society, politics, and literature; a person with a great deal of self-awareness, self-criticism, strong positions, and equally strong changes of heart. In sum, the picture will be disturbing to those who preferred the essentially positive, even heroic profile hitherto provided. Yet, the more complex, even problematic individual who put down so many reactions and insights is far more fascinating. Moreover, he is, once more, an example of how our personalities and experiences are essential in our life with God.

_Saints in Our Own Image?_

One could multiply examples here. Well-known priest, sociologist, and writer Andrew Greeley’s multivolume memoirs are enormous,
Saints as They Really Are

often self-serving and self-obsessed. Yet they are rich in evoking the Catholic Church in American society in the post–World War II years, all through Greeley's view. Also well known for his courageous civil rights and social justice advocacy, Episcopal bishop Paul Moore's memoir is striking. After his death it was countered by the far more provocative memoir of his oldest daughter, a revelation of Moore as even more complex and burdened than his own account. I add to this the biography of his colleague and social activist pastor William Sloane Coffin—a portrait of a very complicated and not always likeable or compassionate man. Add to those some of the other writers we will sample or briefly mention: bestselling memoirs by retired Archbishop Rembert Weakland, theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Eugene H. Peterson, and writers like Mary Karr, Elizabeth Gilbert and Anne Lamott. There is a lot of glitter and adventure, but considerable mess in their lives, as in our own. Recently the release of Mother Teresa's letters, containing a great deal of her spiritual agony and doubts, has been a source of surprise and meditation. How could this heroic little woman, whose life was an icon of caring for the outcast, the sick, the dying, also suffer real doubt in God's presence? In both Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton's journals and letters there are admissions of personal weakness and lapses of faith. In their deal about what we carry around as definitions of holiness. In Beryl Bernstein's biography of Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and other's tells a portrait of imperfections, difficulties, fears and doubts in individuals such as Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and others. For all of those and others, prayer was the air they breathed, the Eucharist their sustenance, the scriptures their language. For all their blots and blemishes, they were with the grace of God striving to live holy lives.

The reactions of well-meaning, even faithful people to apparent imperfections, difficulties, fears, and doubts in individuals such as Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and others tells a great deal about what we carry around as definitions of holiness. In both Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton's journals and letters there are numerous instances of anger and frustration, but also admissions of personal weakness and lapses of faith. In their deal about what we carry around as definitions of holiness. In Beryl Bernstein's biography of Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and other's tells a portrait of imperfections, difficulties, fears and doubts in individuals such as Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and others. For all of those and others, prayer was the air they breathed, the Eucharist their sustenance, the scriptures their language. For all their blots and blemishes, they were with the grace of God striving to live holy lives.
and Skobtsova, died for their positions and work. Yet some would say they were not really martyrs because they did not die specifically for the faith. Weil and Hillesum never were baptized. Roger Schutz spent his life nurturing the ecumenical monastic community and center of Taizé. And after all the decades he devoted to ecumenical prayer and conversation, the churches remain divided, some would say less inclined to further ecumenical work than they were a half century ago. Alexander Men had and still has many enemies in his Russian Orthodox Church, those who reject his work to reconnect society and the church. Holy people are not always successful, popular, or recognized. Desert hermit and mystic Charles de Foucauld had no followers at his death, only after which did the little brothers and sisters come into being. Yet today their numbers are few, and one of the brothers asked in an open letter whether the vision of Brother Charles was lost or never comprehended—to live the hidden life of Jesus in his family and home at Nazareth.

Look at other traditional categories and much the same holds true. The calendars of most churches are full of martyrs in the first place, the highest regarded form of witness in the earliest days, but even then not the only one. There have always been teachers and theologians, as well as other confessors of the faith. Particularly in the Catholic and Orthodox calendars monastic women and men abound. But who are the teachers we look up to today? Many would point to John Paul II. Those more academically experienced might name Karl Rahner, Sergius Bulgakov, Paul Tillich, John Courtney Murray, or Teilhard de Chardin, to name just a few. There has been a rediscovery of Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the leading American theologian of the last half of the twentieth century. Though he was a Baptist pastor and prolific writer, most would recognize Martin Luther King Jr. for his civil rights work and great preaching. As difficult as his writings are, I myself revere the witness and vision of Edward Schillebeeckx, the controversial Dominican theologian recently deceased.11

Every name that could be mentioned here will have critics. Each of those named above I have heard dismissed, both in calm objectivity or with considerable emotional force. Nowadays there are not as many monastics to recall. But if Merton, de Foucauld, or Maria Skobtsova are named, likewise, every one will be rejected for one or
another personal attribute or the lack thereof. It is also important to note how very few husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, scientists, lawyers, physicians, business people, or political leaders are to be found in church lists. Perhaps only in the provocative frescoes of “dancing saints” at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco will one find Ghandi, Malcolm X, Eleanor Roosevelt, Ella Fitzgerald, and Thurgood Marshall among theologians, martyrs, and monastics.¹²

*The Communion of Saints—A Failed Symbol or a Symbol Renewed?*

Elizabeth Johnson has been one of the most discerning students of the rise and fall and rise again of saints and their recognition as well as their veneration. She has looked both back to the historical development of the canonization process as well as forward to a renewed understanding of the communion of saints. Johnson does not hold back on what went wrong over time regarding the clear distortion of the vision of holiness in those officially selected in overwhelming numbers to be called saints.

Public recognition of worthiness, including a place in the calendar of saints, was now to be granted from a single authoritative source, thus shifting what had been an acclamation close to the spiritual life of the people to an increasingly bureaucratized process. . . . Since the right to name the community’s exemplars reinforces the authority of the one who canonizes, this was one more element in the centralization of power in the hands of the papacy. . . . Inevitably the process became political.¹³

Those with more funding and influence were able to push their candidates more effectively, this being the case with religious orders as well as individual bishops and interested wealthy sponsors. Though a centralized and ordered process controlled the naming of truly inappropriate people for reasons other than their sanctity, the process also began to distort the understanding of what a holy person’s life, personality, and ideas were, or ought to be. Obedience and loyalty to the
hierarchy, extraordinary fasting and prayer, extreme sacrifice, even physical and emotional suffering became synonymous with holiness, while creativity, critical thinking, and ordinary vocations of marriage and parenthood disappeared for all practical purposes from the lists of saints. While the record-breaking numbers of individuals beatified and canonized by Pope John Paul II gave the nod to more lay people, even married couples, looking at his more than one thousand additions it is still clear that founders and members of religious communities and the clergy, along with martyrs, dominate.

While canonization developed in response to historical forces, its exercise at this point in time also has a negative impact on popular and theological awareness of the communion of saints. Saints have become an ever more elite group, proclaimed for their heroic virtue and their power to produce spectacular miracles. The unfortunate result has been that meaning of the term “saint” itself has shrunk in Christian usage to refer mostly to those who have been named as a result of this official juridical scrutiny. Not only does this overshadow the theological meaning of the term “saints,” which embraces all persons of love and truth, but existentially the official ideal of perfection rewarded by this process becomes rarified to the point where people reject their own identity as holy and blessed: “I’m no saint.” . . . Product of a clericalized culture, both the roster of canonized saints and the liturgical calendar of saints drawn from it reflect a worldview that is overwhelmingly favorable toward men who are priests or bishops and toward persons of aristocratic and upper-class origins. These “canons” are likewise biased against the full and legitimate use of sexuality by both women and men.14

Johnson cites several studies which verify these claims. From the tenth to the nineteenth centuries 87 percent of Roman Catholic canonizations were of males. In the twentieth century it fell slightly to 75 percent male. From the tenth to the nineteenth centuries, 82 percent of canonized saints were clergy; in the twentieth century this falling to 79 percent.

Glaringly missing from the canonized lists are married people honored for the goodness and exemplarity of their lives precisely as actively
married. The official ideal of holiness thus marginalizes lives in which sexual activity in integrated rather than excluded, sending a message that most people live in a less-than-holy way. . . . It is obvious from this roster that the history of women’s holiness is given extremely short shrift. . . . Another flag raised is by the fact that saints must pass muster before a narrow definition of doctrinal orthodoxy, thereby largely excluding pioneering thinkers, intellectuals, artists or anyone with a critical or challenging spirit.15

Add to this that the process must be instigated by the hierarchy, is expensive, slow, requires scrutiny of everything a person ever wrote or said publicly, everything they were witnessed to have done—it is no wonder that the official saints do not reflect the diversity of the whole people of God. It is no wonder either, that for so many today, such saints have become at best irrelevant and at worst problematic and alienating.

While Elizabeth Johnson and the authors cited above focus upon the canonization history and process in the Roman Catholic Church, there is little essential difference from that in the Eastern Churches with one exception: it is still possible, in principle, for a truly “local church,” say a diocese, to canonize one of its own, the recognition then spreading gradually to the rest of that national church as well as others. A number of contemporary figures in the Eastern Orthodox Church have been canonized locally. Raphael Hawaweeny was the Lebanese bishop of Brooklyn, New York, and was canonized by two American Orthodox church bodies, one the direct successor of his own church. Nikolai Velimirovich was a Serbian bishop who spent a number of years in America. He was canonized by his home diocese of Zicha in Serbia. Poet, social activist, and nun Mother Maria Skobtsova and her companions in Paris were made saints by their own western European archdiocese headquartered in Paris. The cases of Olga Michael Arsumqaq, a Yup’ik priest’s wife and healer, and widower Metropolitan Bishop Leonty Turkevich are still pending in the Orthodox Church in America. Both were extraordinary—in their very ordinary lives.16

So, we could speak of a “crisis” of sanctity, not of the reality of lived holiness by any means, but of the church recognition of