

Rector's Corner

Talk On Saints and Saintliness

After presenting a talk on saints and saintliness at last week's Senior Luncheon, one of the organizers asked me to write up my thoughts for distribution to the parish, which I am happy to do. While there is a rich and venerable tradition of understanding the saints as enjoying the greatest possible union with God in heaven, my focus here is on aspects of sainthood on earth: what qualities are most important in the lives of saints, and how the Church officially recognizes and celebrates saints.

The first generation of Christians referred to all Christians as "saints." (The word "Christian" was originally a derogatory term used by the Romans against followers of Jesus Christ.) But the first generation of Christians also began the tradition of recognizing and venerating Christians who lived lives of exceptional faith, both informally and liturgically, and that tradition continues today.

A distinction is commonly made between "saints" and "sinners," but with the possible exception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, all saints are sinners. In many cases, overcoming sin is a key moment that leads someone to a faithful life, or is even the reason why someone is considered a saint. Peter repenting of his denial of Jesus and Paul's conversion from oppressor to evangelist are prominent Biblical examples. Remembering that the saints struggled with sin and temptation should make them relatable, and remind us both of God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness, and of our own potential for saintliness, despite our sins. An important Biblical pattern is that of God calling conspicuously flawed people to be prophets and other religious leaders, so that any success the leader demonstrates may be understood, correctly, as coming from God, rather than from the person's own greatness.

The idea that Mary was without sin is very important to some Christians, and is implied by the angel Gabriel's greeting in Luke 1:28, but not stated explicitly in the New Testament. More widely believed, and in my view more important, is that Mary was Jesus's first and most faithful follower, setting the standard by which all others may be measured.

The Church has always used the same basic process of recognizing individuals as saints. Observances begin locally, among people who knew someone personally. If the celebratory commemoration of someone's life continues for multiple generations, the community might start to recommend that other Christian congregations celebrate them. If the celebration

catches on, it might be formally recognized with its own propers (a collect and readings that can be used for a service celebrating the person) and a day on the church's sanctoral calendar.

The Episcopal Church's sanctoral calendar is available in a book, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, which contains propers and short biographies of the people we celebrate, plus readings for Eucharistic services on weekdays that are not set apart as holy days. This book also describes our church's understanding of saints and their liturgical celebration, and what qualities we're looking for when considering adding new people to the calendar.

Lesser Feasts and Fasts says, "What we celebrate in the lives of the saints is the presence of Christ expressing itself in and through particular lives lived in the midst of specific historical circumstances. In the saints we are not dealing primarily with absolutes of perfection but human lives, in all their diversity, open to the motions of the Holy Spirit. Many a holy life, when carefully examined, will reveal flaws or the bias of a particular moment in history... It should encourage us to realize that the saints, like us, are first and foremost redeemed sinners in whom the risen Christ's words to St. Paul come to fulfillment, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' "

It goes on to say that "The Church commemorates persons, not abstract qualities. Nevertheless, it does look for certain traits in those whom it chooses specially to commemorate." The first is "heroic faith," that is, holding fast to one's faith even when doing so will bring suffering or death, or a high risk thereof. Martyrs – specifically, those "who have chosen to die rather than give up the Christian faith," are first in this category, but many other saints "have endured imprisonment, torture, or exile for the sake of Christ."

Three related qualities the Church looks for are love, goodness of life, and joyousness. Love, of course, refers to Christian love, also known as love of neighbor or *agapé*, which tends to be visible in goodness of life. *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* points out that "The Church looks not only for goodness but also for growth in goodness. A scandalous life prior to conversion does not disqualify one from consideration for the Calendar; rather, the witness of perseverance to the end will confirm holiness of life and the transforming power of Christ." And while joyousness is not the same thing as happiness or cheerfulness – consider the joy of Jesus on the cross, knowing he was accomplishing the salvation of humanity – the fullness of Christian sanctity includes "rejoicing in the Spirit."

Jesus emphasized both service to others and devotion to God, summarizing divine Law as love of God and neighbor. Thus, the Church seeks these traits in those proposed for formal recognition as saints. Finally, an individual must be recognized as worthy of liturgical commemoration by the community in which they were personally known, and such observance

should spread beyond that community, before that community can ask the rest of the church to commemorate them – and there is nothing wrong with someone remaining a figure of local commemoration; our Prayer Book envisions this as a normative aspect of parish life – and their recognition should continue beyond the lives of those who knew them personally. The norm is two generations, or 50 years, after the death of the individual. This is to ensure that historical perspective corroborates, rather than diminishes, enthusiasm for the recognition of an individual's life.

If you want the latest edition of *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, it is available for purchase from Church Publishing: <https://www.churchpublishing.org/lesserfeastsandfasts2022>

The Church has made the previous edition available for download here (although it is still under copyright): <https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/21034>

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