

COLUMNISTS

Bias still favors celibate saints

The feast of All Saints is an annual reminder that only the tiniest fraction of holy women and holy men have been canonized by the church. And of those who have been canonized, a disproportionate number are drawn from the ranks of celibate popes, bishops, priests and nuns.

Even in this modern age it would be highly unlikely for married people of truly heroic virtue to be canonized unless, upon the death of their spouses, they founded or entered a religious order.

There are three reasons for this imbalance between celibate and married canonized saints: The first two are financial and political, the third is theological.

It costs a great deal of money to move a canonization forward over the course of many years, and, therefore, one needs the backing of a large and powerful organization, usually a religious order, not only to provide the necessary financial resources but also to have the Vatican take the petition seriously.

But money and influence alone do not account for the disproportionate number of celibate clergy and religious on the official list of saints. The theological factor has always been the crucial one.

For centuries many church leaders, theologians and spiritual writers regarded marriage (and the sexual intimacy that is intrinsic to it) as the lesser of two evils. It is "better to marry than to burn,"



essays in
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

St. Paul insisted (1 Corinthians 7:9).

This is not to say that the early Church was closed to marriage. On the contrary, the New Testament portrays marriage as a symbol of Christ's union with his church (Ephesians 5:21-33), and there are several passages where the messianic period is described as a wedding feast (Matthew 9:15; 25:1-13; Mark 2:19; John 3:29). But the early missionary ideal was to leave spouse and family behind in order to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Mark 10:29; Luke 18:29).

Paul urged the faithful to renounce marriage in favor of virginity because he assumed that the risen Lord would return soon and because he worried about marriage's being a distraction in the meantime (1 Corinthians 7:32-35). In effect, he reduced marriage to something of secondary importance.

Whereas the story of creation in Genesis (2:18-24) cautioned the Israelites that it is "not good that the man should be alone," Paul declared that "it is well

for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Corinthians 7:1).

Beginning in the third century, the ideal of virginity over marriage came to be linked with the by-now almost universal belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary. Consecrated virginity was established as a special state in the church, and Mary was presented as the model.

The Fathers of the church, particularly St. Augustine, laid the groundwork for the medieval view of marriage as "a lawful remedy for concupiscence." For Augustine marriage had no other purpose than to produce children. Sexual desires are the unfortunate effects of original sin, and original sin itself is transmitted through the sexual union of husband and wife.

Every child is born of the parents' "sin" because procreation is possible only with the seductive aid of physical lust. But it is a tolerable "sin," according to Augustine, because God wills that we should be fruitful and multiply, and procreation within marriage provides a legitimate way of keeping "perverse desire within proper bounds."

Fortunately, the Second Vatican Council began the process of putting things right with regard to the theology of marriage and of human sexuality in general.

The council set aside the longstanding view that the begetting of children always takes precedence over the expression of mutual love between spouses.

(For a long time this principle was used to discourage, and sometimes actually prevent, the elderly and the physically disabled from marrying.) The council made clear that the expression of mutual love is not "of less value" than the begetting of children (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 50).

The canonizing of so many celibates, however, would be a matter of indifference if it were not for the fact that the reason the church canonizes saints is to provide personal examples of virtue for the rest of us (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, nn. 50-51). Those who achieve sanctity outside of marriage are simply less compelling examples of virtue for the great majority of us who are married, have been married, or aspire to be married.

Married saints provide that example, but it takes money, influence, and especially a healthier theology of marriage and human sexuality to change the bias in the canonization process that still exists in favor of celibates.

We can overcome the first two obstacles (financial and political) by returning to the practice of the first 1,000 years of church history, namely, by the popular acclamation of saints. Fortunately, the third obstacle is already collapsing of its own dead weight.

...
Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Early writings remain outside canonical Gospel

Q. In your column nearly two years ago, you mentioned other Gospels than the four we have. You specifically referred to the Gospel of Thomas and said the text is available. Can you tell us where?

How many other Gospels are there? Why don't we hear more about them? (North Carolina)

A. We are aware of several Gospels and other writings composed by early Christians, which for awhile held some prominence, but gradually fell along the wayside.

They include the so-called Gospel of Mary, the Proto-Evangelion ("original Gospel") of James, the Apocalypse of Peter and so on.

At least several seem to have connections with one of the gnostic sects, which for many years occasioned intense philosophical and theological conflicts within Christian communities of the first centuries.

For the most part we possess almost nothing of the actual texts, just a few isolated scraps of passages and a number of references to them in other documents.

The Gospel of Thomas is special for a



question
corner

By FATHER JOHN DIETZEN

number of reasons. While scholars knew it existed, and quotations from it were numerous, the full text only became available about 50 years ago.

As the astounding story goes, two poor Egyptian men were wandering along the upper Nile in 1945, near the modern city of New Hammadi, looking for fertilizer. Under a rock they discovered a large jar, which they suspected held a magic spirit or perhaps a treasure.

When they opened the jar, specks of brown papyrus flew out. Inside were 13 papyrus codices (books) from the ancient library of Nag Hammadi, including the complete Coptic text of the Gospel of Thomas.

Since then, this Gospel has proven a priceless resource for New Testament studies. It differs from the canonical Gospels in that it is composed entirely of 114 "hidden sayings the living Jesus spoke and Judas Thomas the Twin recorded."

Nearly half of these sayings appear one way or another in our four Gospels; but 65 are found only in Thomas. These parallels, and lack of parallels, significantly affect the study of the sayings of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels.

Thomas may even be among the resources used in some manner by the authors of Mark, Matthew and Luke as they composed their Gospels. Certainly a close relationship of some sort exists between them.

As helpful and remarkable as these apocryphal Gospels may be, we need to keep in mind that they do not and will not participate in the unique role the four canonical Gospels have in Christian tradition and life.

When we call Matthew, Mark, Luke and John the canonical Gospels, we mean they are the "canon," the rule of Scriptural faith, the measure against

which all Christian belief must be tested.

We do not believe that everything in Christian life and doctrine must be found in the Gospels; we do believe that nothing in our teaching and practice may be contrary to the Gospels.

How did our four Gospels come to be accepted as authoritative presentations of Christ and his message, while the others were gradually laid aside?

The answer isn't entirely clear, but our faith is that the Holy Spirit guided the Christian communities to recognize and embrace Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as authentic sources for a true relationship with Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, the church also has never considered combining or harmonizing the four into one. Each of the four has its own unique Christology, its own essential portrait of Christ, which would be lost if all were melted together.

The Gospel of Thomas is available, among other places, in a book of that name, published by Harpers.

...
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