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SAINTS & SANITY



Canonized show mental illness may not block path to sanctity

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Simeon Stylites chained his hands and feet together and lived 35 years on a 6-foot-square platform on top of a pole, gradually extending the height of the pole over the years until it was more than 60 feet high.

Benedict Labre, who was tossed out of every congregation he joined, lived like a beggar, crawling with vermin, wearing rags, camping in the ruins of the Colosseum in Rome for seven years.

Teresa of Avila was troubled by voices only she could hear, and was plagued by doubts for many years whether she was following the will of God — or the devil.

Were they living today, these three might have been considered prime candidates for psychiatric help.

These three are also considered saints — and in the case of St. Teresa, a doctor of the church.

"I think you can go back through the lives of the saints and find example after example of people that would respond to psychiatric help," commented Father Thomas Hctor, chaplain at the

Rochester Psychiatric Center.

Indeed, the church's history is full of saints who heard voices, had visions, experienced catatonic-like states, undertook long fasts, or intentionally inflicted pain upon themselves through such penitential devices as chains and hair shirts. Some of these manifestations may have been signs of their sanctity; others may have been symptomatic of mental problems.

But even though some may have had conditions that warranted psychiatric help, Father Hctor maintained that that does not necessarily preclude their being saints.

"People don't seem to have a problem with other illnesses as obstacles to holiness," he commented. He noted, by way of example, "It's clear Bernadette Soubirous was a consumptive."

Indeed, Father John Eudes Bamberger, who in addition to being the abbot of the Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard, is a psychiatrist, pointed out that Pope Pius XII (1939-58), for example, did not preclude sanctity for those suffering from certain kinds of mental illness.

"He said neuroses is not an obstacle to sanity,
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Artist's work inspires hope

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Joan Hickey, 48, died April 22, 1994, after battling mental illness for more than three decades.

But thanks to a chaplain and an artist, she will not be easily forgotten.

On Aug. 24, a painting depicting Hickey in the company of five saints (left) was dedicated in St. Jude Chapel in the Rochester Psychiatric Center. She had been a patient there off and on.

The 4-by-6-foot pastel painting by James Sturtevant of Rochester was the idea of Father Thomas Hctor, the center's chaplain. Money for the painting was donated in Hickey's memory by the Friends of the Rochester Psychiatric Center, an organization her father, Thomas Hickey, helped to found.

"I had been thinking about this," Father Hctor explained. "I just expanded my concept."

He had been thinking about a painting depicting saints in some way with mental illness — either because they might have had such problems, or because their lives or writings help individuals deal with their own problems. The saints in Sturtevant's creation are St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Simeon Stylites, St. Philip Neri and St. Dymphna, the patron saint of those who suffer from mental illness.

At the dedication, Father Hctor distributed a flier describing why the particular saints were chosen.

St. John of the Cross, for example, was "persecuted by his own order and the Inquisition," Father Hctor wrote.

Of St. Teresa, he noted, "The visions and voices she experienced in her life led to ridicule and persecution."

And St. Philip Neri, he wrote, "sometimes would stop in vision for two hours or more during his Mass" and "sometimes shave in an odd way, or wear vestments inside out to divert crowds from making him a cult figure."

Hickey, meanwhile, is depicted dressed in white and holding a lamb to suggest her innocence.

"She represents all of our patients," Father Hctor explained to the *Catholic Courier*.

Hickey's father acknowledged not only was he pleased with the tribute the paint-

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