

COLUMNISTS

Our view of saints colors our concept of religion

Nothing underscores the difficulty some people have in understanding the true meaning and purpose of religion as much as their attitude toward saints.

For them, saints fall into a number of categories. First and foremost are the intercessors. If we've lost something, we pray to St. Anthony of Padua. If we get a sore throat, we pray to St. Blase or have our throats blessed on his feast day. If we find ourselves in a situation of apparent hopelessness, we pray to St. Jude.

In this view, saints are heavenly figures who help us gain spiritual and material benefits. By implication, religion is a form of negotiation with God in which others speak and act on our behalf. They, in turn, coach us on the most effective ways of gaining entrance into heaven.

St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, for example, informed us that devotion to the Sacred Heart, expressed by attending Mass and receiving Holy Communion on nine consecutive first Fridays, would guarantee our salvation.

But it's not only heaven that counts. Since we want our lives on earth to be as comfortable and as misery-free as possible, there are saints (known as patrons and patronesses) for almost every conceivable need or problem, from headaches (St. Denis and St. Teresa of Avila)



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

to hemorrhoids (St. Fiacre), from running a restaurant (St. Martha) to making a retreat (St. Ignatius of Loyola), and from dancing (St. Vitus) to diplomacy (the Archangel Gabriel).

For still others, saints are odd folks whose lives no ordinary person could (or would) want to emulate. They hated the thought of physical intimacy with the opposite sex (a word that wouldn't have passed their lips to begin with), and they had disdain for the other normal pleasures of life: good food and drink, happy times with one's friends, decent-looking clothes and a comfortable bed on which to sleep. Utterly bereft of a sense of humor, they probably looked as if they had just received some terrible news that the rest of us hadn't heard yet.

Saints of this sort rejected marriage as

unworthy of a truly holy person. They suffered violent death rather than marry. At night they slept on the ground with a stone or a block of wood as a pillow. By day, they lived atop a pile of rocks, known as stylites, or wore crowns of thorns or hairshirts — the better to show contempt for the body.

According to this second mentality, religion is little more than an organized method designed to overcome the spiritual liabilities of being human. What pertains to the body and to relationships with other people is to be kept under strict control, if not suppressed entirely.

A woman is to be covered so as not to look like a woman. Marriage is but a "lawful remedy for concupiscence" (as the old-theology textbooks put it), and sexual intimacy is a necessary evil to co-create new "souls" to worship and glorify God for all eternity.

A third view of saints is that of an elite minority of human beings, specially chosen and set apart by God. Such saints were made aware of their calling by wondrous means, such as an apparition of the divine Redeemer himself or, more often now, of his Blessed Mother. The apparition would usually be accompanied by a mandate to start a new devotion, for example, to the Five Wounds of

Christ, the Sacred Heart, or the Immaculate Heart of Mary, or to build a church.

Sometimes the apparition would be authenticated by a bodily sign, such as the stigmata (replications of the wounds Christ suffered in his passion and death), or by the conferral of a super-human capacity to read minds or to fly through the air.

The implication of this view of sanctity is that religion is a kind of science-fiction enterprise. It seeks to disclose and to provide access to a mysterious universe in which long-deceased figures contact living persons in order to guide them — often by warnings and threats — toward heavenly bliss and away from eternal damnation. To be aware of the most recent sighting of Christ or Mary, therefore, is to be kept abreast of the latest version of the ever-changing code that one needs to enter the heavenly gates.

If, on the other hand, religion is about the love of God expressed through our love of neighbor, sanctity has more to do with the quality of human relationships than with the odd or the bizarre. As one spiritual writer put it, holiness is wholeness.

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

Persistence in prayer is key to God's assistance

17th Sunday of the Year (July 29): (R3) Luke 11:1-13; (R1) Genesis 18:20-32; (R2) Colossians 2:12-14.

The readings next Sunday focus on prayer. To the unbeliever prayer is an exercise in futility. But to the believer, prayer is the most powerful and the most reliable force in the world today.

Prayer had such an affect on our Lord's life that his disciples asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray." In response, Jesus taught them the Our Father. The Our Father has seven petitions. The first three deal with the glory of God; the fourth one asks for daily bread; and the other three for spiritual blessings.

God knows the very desires of our hearts before we even mention them. Yet God wills us to pray, not to make known to him our needs, but to make known to ourselves our need for God. God wants us to ask for certain things. Why? Man's greatest danger to his salvation is to declare his independence of God. Were everything given man without his asking, proud-bent as he is, man would soon think himself lord and master of all things. Such pride would lead to his fall.

The key to effective prayer is persistence. Nothing is so fragile as a drop of water nor so resistant as rock. Yet the



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

constancy of the dropping water can burrow through even a rock.

Jesus told of a man whose friend dropped in unexpectedly and he had nothing to serve him. Though it is midnight, the host went to his friend's house and knocked on his door asking him to loan some bread. At first he is ignored. Finally, the friend gives him the bread. Jesus said prayer is like that. If an unwilling person grants a request because of another's persistence, how much more will God, who wills to answer our prayers, give to those who ask of him!

Jesus said, "Ask and you shall receive." If you don't, then "seek and you shall find." If still no answer, don't give up. "Knock and it shall be opened to you."

God has promised to heed our

prayers. Our part is to trust God and realize that no matter what answer God gives to our prayers, it is always for our best good. As Jesus said, "What father among you will give his son a snake if he asks for a fish, or hand him a scorpion if he asks for an egg? If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children good things, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

The disciples discovered that through prayer, God gave them great power to help others. After our Lord had risen from the dead and had ascended to his Father, Peter, his successor, was taken prisoner by King Herod. Herod intended to kill Peter as he had James. The disciples had no fire power to rescue Peter from prison, but they had prayer power. So they met in a home and prayed. In answer to their prayer, God sent an angel who released Peter from prison. Freed, Peter went to the very house where the church had been praying for his release (Acts 12:1-17). From the very beginning the church learned that if you want to help someone, pray for them.

Prayer has no sword nor saber,
No mighty bayonet,
Threats not to crush its neighbor

'neath its heel, and yet,
When all else fails, prayer prevails.

If you pray well, you'll live well. If you live well, you'll die well. If you die well, you won't go to hell. If you don't go to hell, then all is well.

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, July 30

Exodus 32:15-24, 30-34; Psalms 106:19-23; Matthew 13:31-35

Tuesday, July 31

Exodus 33:7-11, 34:5B-9, 28; Psalms 103:6-13; Matthew 13:36-43

Wednesday, August 1

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalms 99:5-7, 9; Matthew 13:44-46

Thursday, August 2

Exodus 40:16-21, 34-38; Psalms 84:3-6, 8-11; Matthew 13:47-53

Friday, August 3

Leviticus 23:1, 4-11, 15-16, 27, 34B-37; Psalms 81:3-6, 10-11; Matthew 13:54-58

Saturday, August 4

Leviticus 25:1, 8-17; Psalms 67:2-3, 5, 7-8; Matthew 14:1-12

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