

COLUMNISTS

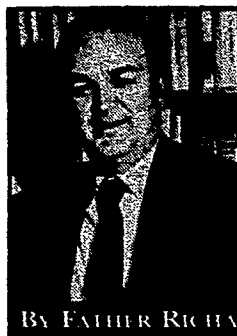
Saints should be models of ordinary lives

Pope John Paul II has announced that he will canonize three new saints sometime in the new year: Josemaria Escrivà de Balaguer, the Spanish priest who founded Opus Dei; Padre Pio, the Italian Capuchin friar who was alleged to have borne the wounds of Christ (the stigmata) on his own body and to have heard as many as 25,000 confessions a year; and Juan Diego, an illiterate Amerindian peasant who claimed that Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to him on a hill just outside Mexico City in 1531.

None of these canonizations will apply the Second Vatican Council's teaching that saints are primarily models and exemplars of the Christian life, not wonder-workers and intercessors (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 50).

To be an effective model of Christian holiness, the saint must be someone with whom the great majority of the faithful can identify. But the majority of the faithful are married, with children and grandchildren. Therefore, the church should normally raise up for emulation those who lived an ordinary married life in an extraordinarily virtuous fashion.

Unfortunately, most canonizations have been of priests and nuns. A lay person presented as a model of Christian



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

sanctity is usually someone who never married or who, upon the death of their spouse, entered a convent or seminary, or founded a new religious order.

Recently, the pope beatified an Italian couple who had been married for nearly 50 years and had four children. It seemed that the Vatican had taken to heart the criticism that too many canonizations were of priests and nuns. But upon a closer look, disappointment set in.

According to their two priest-sons, Luigi and Maria Quattrocchi lived as brother and sister for the last 26 years of their marriage and none of their four children ever married. Two became priests, one entered a convent, and the fourth became a consecrated virgin.

Vocations are a mysterious thing. No

one should cast aspersions on the choices the children made but the family is hardly typical, leading one to wonder how it serves as a model of sanctity.

The same question can be raised about the newest candidates for canonization. Escrivà was acutely critical of the Second Vatican Council and the popes who led it: John XXIII and Paul VI.

He was particularly disdainful of its liturgical reforms: substitution of the vernacular for the Latin and, especially, the increased participation of the laity in the Eucharist, including responses to prayers, the reading of the Word of God, the bearing of gifts, and — most distasteful — the distribution of Holy Communion.

Although Opus Dei is designed to encourage and support lay people as they go about their ordinary Christian lives, it is controlled by clerics and its spirituality includes some extreme expressions of pre-Vatican II asceticism, like self-flagellation, that have no meaning or value for the average healthy lay person.

With regard to Padre Pio, how many of the faithful aspire to bear the physical marks of Christ crucified, or regard that as at all relevant to their daily lives as Christians? Were they actually to receive the stigmata, they would probably rush

to the nearest hospital rather than to fall to their knees in grateful adoration.

Indeed, the stigmata are not the first thing one thinks of when contemplating the signs of a truly holy life. Nor would any priest think it a desirable goal to hear 25,000 confessions a year. Given the time and attention required, neither the priest nor his penitents would have an authentic experience of reconciliation as the church intends it to be celebrated.

Finally, Our Lady of Guadalupe surely plays a great, even central, role in the history, culture and spirituality of Latin America. But here again Juan Diego is being singled out for spiritual emulation, not because he lived an ordinary life in an extraordinarily virtuous way, but simply because of the belief that the Blessed Virgin herself appeared to him.

The marks of authentic holiness are love, joy, compassion, justice, forgiveness, mercy, patience and self-sacrifice. For 95 percent of the church, if such virtues are lived at all, they are lived by ordinary married lay people.

And if saints are models before all else, their ranks should reflect this fact.

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

Unconditional love has redeeming power

2nd Sunday of the Year (Jan. 20): (R3) John 1:29-34; (R1) Isaiah 49:3, 5-6; (R2) 1 Corinthians 1:1-3.

When it comes to changing hearts, you won't find a better example than John the Baptist. He prepared the way for Jesus. His techniques and his appearance were peculiar. His home was in the Judean desert. His diet was of locusts and honey, his attire of camel's hair. He called the esteemed religious leaders of his time "a brood of vipers," telling them that their ancestry would not save them from "the coming wrath." (Matthew 3:7)

John was not some fanatic in need of a good diet and a haberdasher. He provided some deep insights into the meaning of Christ's coming into the world. He states that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

By lifting up Jesus as the Lamb of God, John points us to the meaning of Jesus' life. Throughout Scripture the image of the sacrificial lamb conveys the idea of the persecuted innocent suffering on behalf of others. Then, in the feast of the Passover, the lamb becomes the symbol for deliverance. In the days of our Lord, part of the Paschal lamb would be offered at the temple. The remaining portion would be consumed at home during the Passover meal. The lamb, therefore,



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

meant both sacrifice for and deliverance from sin. John was saying that Jesus is both the Innocent Suffering One and the Triumphant One who conquers sin and death. John was connoting the meekness and mildness of Jesus and his conquest of the greatest enemy of mankind, sin and death itself.

Secondly, John teaches that Jesus was the preexistent Word. "A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me." This is fascinating because John and Jesus were related. And Scripture says that John was born six months before Jesus. So when John says "he existed before me," John was pointing out that great truth found in the prologue of the apostle John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word (that is, Jesus), and the Word was with God, and the Word

was God. He was in the beginning with God." (John 1:1-2)

John's final insight is that Jesus is the Son of God.

When Jesus allowed John to baptize him, it surprised John. He felt unworthy, yet Jesus insisted that John baptize him to show his identification with John's work as well as to offer an identifying sign. The sign was the Holy Spirit resting upon Jesus in the form of a dove and God's voice. (John 1:32)

God spoke these words "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17) If more children had unconditional love from their fathers, many of our social ills would surely decrease.

Dr. John Trent tells of a childhood friend, Roger, whose father was an alcoholic. When Roger was 15, his father died. Roger had a high probability of following in his father's footsteps. But he was one of the most stable, caring young men Dr. Trent knew, a responsible young man who took good care of his wife and children.

The secret to Roger's success lay in something few people knew. Every night before Roger went to bed, his father told him how proud he was of him, pointing out his accomplishments and good points. This love and encouragement more than

made up for his father's alcoholism.

It makes a great difference in our lives when we know we are loved. Unconditional love has tremendous redeeming power. "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

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

Daily Readings

Monday, January 21

1 Samuel 15:16-23; Psalms 50:8-9, 16-17, 21, 23; Mark 2:18-22

Tuesday, January 22

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalms 89:20-22, 27-28; Mark 2:23-28

Wednesday, January 23

1 Samuel 17:32-33, 37, 40-51; Psalms 144:1-2, 9-10; Mark 3:1-6

Thursday, January 24

1 Samuel 18:6-9, 19:1-7; Psalms 56:2-3, 9-14; Mark 3:7-12

Friday, January 25

Acts 22:3-16 or Acts 9:1-22; Psalms 117:1-2; Mark 16:15-18

Saturday, January 26

2 Timothy 1:1-8 or Titus 1:1-5; Psalms 96:1-3, 7-8A, 10; Mark 3:20-21

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