

Saints are models of Christian discipleship

"Hardly any practice is so distinctively Catholic as the cult of saints," Cardinal Avery Dulles once wrote. And hardly any theological perspective is so distinctively Catholic as the sacramental.

The principle of sacramentality reflects Catholicism's core conviction that the infinite, invisible God is present and redemptively active in the finite, visible, human realities of the world, especially in human persons who embody and practice the goodness and love of God toward one another.

Every woman, man and child who has "heroically" (that is, in some truly extraordinary fashion) responded to God's call to holiness in this life is a saint, canonized or not. They embody the invisible presence of the Holy Spirit. As such, they are sacraments — visible signs and instruments of God's presence and saving activity.

At the heart of this sacramental perspective is the belief that God's redemptive presence has been supremely — and uniquely — embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. According to this sacramental view, the church is the ecclesial (mystical) body of Christ and is also his "fundamental sacrament," that is, the basis and prototype of the whole sacramental life of the church, from baptism to the anointing of the sick.

Because the church itself is a sacrament, it has a missionary responsibility to manifest in its own life, members, ministries and structural operations the ho-



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Essays in Theology

liness of "the Holy One of God," Jesus Christ. According to the Second Vatican Council, the church is "a sign and instrument ... of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 1).

The relevance of sacramentality to the veneration of saints is underscored in Paul's Letter to the Hebrews: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith" (12:1-2).

To those who wondered how they could pattern their lives on Christ's when they did not know him, Paul wrote: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

The church lifts up its saints to provide models and examples of Christian discipleship. We are encouraged to imitate them, in whom the grace of Christ has visibly triumphed, because in imitating the saints we are imitating Christ himself.

When, in our devotion to

saints, we regard them primarily as miracle-workers, intercessors and benefactors, it can be a relatively short step from there to acts of superstition and idolatry.

Out of concern for that risk, Vatican II called for the removal or correction of "abuses, excesses, or defects" in Catholic devotions to the saints, reminding us that "the authentic cult of the saints does not consist so much in a multiplicity of external acts, but rather in a more intense practice of the love of Christ for all" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 51).

The 16th-century Christian humanist, Erasmus, made essentially the same point: "No devotion to the saints is more acceptable to God than the imitation of their virtues ..."

The theology that underlies our annual feast of All Saints is aptly expressed in the council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: "In the lives of those companions of ours who are more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ, God ... speaks to us in them and offers us a sign of his Kingdom, to which we are powerfully attracted, so great a cloud of witness are we given and such an affirmation of the truth of the Gospel."

What is true of saints is true of the church. It is a communion of saints and, as such, "a light to the nations."

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Caption for celibacy story 'disturbing'

To the editor:

The caption under the photograph on page one of your article "Celibacy through the ages" (Oct. 17) disturbs us.

The caption states: "... St. Peter offered an early model of Christian celibacy by leaving his family to follow Jesus." Since Jesus preached "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder," does anyone really believe that Jesus encouraged or allowed the breakup of marriages, even in Peter's case, to promote His cause? In fact, at that time, Jesus tried to elevate women to a higher level of status and respect, since women were often considered "property" in that society. If Jesus wanted only celibacy, He would have chosen only unmarried men. None would have been married.

When Jesus said: "Leave everything and follow me," what did He mean? This was an invitation for His disciples to change their life's work and come to work in Jesus' ministry. This new ministry took them away from home and family and required extensive traveling on foot from town to town which often took days and weeks — quite different from our modern-day convenient traveling by car or plane. Do we really think Jesus was trying to break up marriages to get His mission accomplished?

Imagine if Jesus had bro-

ken up Peter's marriage! Would Peter's mother-in-law have allowed Jesus and Peter into her home, much less allowed Jesus to heal her, let alone waited on Him (Matthew 8:14, 15)? She would have thrown them out of the house, if Jesus had encouraged Peter to leave her daughter!

Your October 17 article indicates that this is the first in a series of articles on celibacy. We hope a future article will portray how women were depicted or viewed by some of the Church writers and clerics after celibacy began to be legislated. This would be an eye-opener for your readers today.

William and Ann Irwin
West Gray Street
Elmira

EDITOR'S NOTE: Unfortunately, our caption somewhat overstated the case. Some theologians believe Peter did leave his family; others disagree.

Ads conflict with article

To the editor:

The October 17 edition of the *Catholic Courier* included a wonderful article titled "Violent messages run deep." In it practicing psychologist Rachel Bryant of Elmira pointed out that "kids' sensibilities are being assaulted." She described the "toxic cultural environment that they accept as normal" and explained that "so much of what they see is angry, negative and harmful" and that "sexual talk and touch" are common. "Where" she asks, "is the compassion, empathy and kindness."

As a parent I agree with her wholeheartedly. That's why I was surprised to see the *Catholic Courier* print just below this article an advertisement for books by Stephen King, Danielle Steele, and others who promote just the things she described as negative influences. On the page opposite this article was an ad for "family entertainment" videos including "The Scor-

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