

SAINTS

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In the book, Binz recalls his early resistance to the idea of burying a St. Joseph statue, which he considered superstitious and crude. Once he grudgingly accepted the idea, however, he really began to think about Joseph, and the trials and tribulations of his life with Mary and Jesus. The more he thought, the more Joseph became less of a legendary figure to him and more of a real man.

As a result, Binz said, he developed a relationship with Joseph, which shifted the statue-burying ritual from the realm of superstition into that of prayer. The relationship, he said, is more important than which corner of the yard a statue is buried in or whether the statue is upside down. To begin a relationship with a particular saint, Binz suggested reading a biography about the saint's life to learn what they were like while they were on earth.

Father Michael Volino, parochial vicar of St. John the Evangelist Parish in Greece, said many people choose a favorite or patron saint based on their identification with the saint's characteristics, traits, hobbies or occupations. Father Volino says he identifies with Blessed Miguel Pro, who is on his way to becoming a saint. Blessed Miguel Pro, a Mexican martyr who died in 1927, enjoyed playing the guitar, teaching and making people laugh — all things Father Volino said he can identify with.

"He was ordinary, and then there's that heroic extraordinary courage that he received from the grace of God," Father Volino said, referring to the martyr's strong faith even in the face of death.

Critics of Catholicism have accused Catholics of worshipping saints, which would violate the first commandment prohibition against idolatry. This is a misperception, Father Volino said.

"The saints are not magicians or wizards," he said. "We should see



Nancy Wiechec/CNS

A mosaic in a small grotto outside the Franciscan Monastery in Washington depicts St. Jude.

them as friends, as people we can approach, not distant people who live in the clouds. They do not take anything away from worship to Christ or the Trinity. I think they draw us ever closer to Christ."

He likened the statue of a saint to a picture of a beloved friend or family member who has passed away. A person might display such a picture, and even touch or talk to it sometimes, but that doesn't mean the person is praying to their late friend or relative, he said.

"It just helps you physically, spiritually and emotionally get in touch with that person," Father Volino said.

Binz agreed, saying in his book that a crucial part of devotion to a saint is asking the saint to pray for the one still on earth, since the saint already is in heaven with God. One element of devotion to St. Joseph, he wrote, is asking him to pray for those on earth.

Saints can also provide examples for people struggling to live out their faith in today's world, noted Father Sebastian Falcone, president emeritus and professor of biblical studies

at St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry.

"I think we look to them because we always look to those who set a pattern of excellence. They have faced pretty much the same trials and tribulations as we do, and have made a splendid success of it. They're worthy of imitation," Father Falcone said.

Another popular Catholic devotional practice is the novena, through which people offer intentions every day for nine days to Mary, other saints or a particular aspect of the person or mystery of Christ, such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Father Volino said the novena is tradition dating back to the time of Jesus and should not be dismissed as superstitious.

"It reminds me of the period of waiting of the Apostles and Mary for Pentecost," he said. "That was the first novena, and that's where novenas came from. I see the value behind bringing your petitions each day through the intercessions and prayers of a particular saint," Father Volino said.

Father Falcone said novenas are not superstitious in themselves, but said their focus should be on prayer, not on the number nine.

"Once we start getting into the mathematic aspect of practices, we need to be sure that the math doesn't overtake the intentions of the heart. When mathematics begin to take over the spirit of piety, we need to feel it's not genuinely an expression of piety," he said.

Both priests said the intention of the person engaging in a devotional practice is what determines whether it is superstition or prayer.

Saints are often subject not only to superstition, but also to myths and rumors. Many people believe, for example, that St. Christopher is no longer a saint because his July 25 feast day was removed from the church's universal calendar in 1969. In a 1996 article, Catholic News Service explained that St. Christopher and "dozens of others" were stricken

ROCHESTER'S PATRON

In 1961, at the request of then-Bishop James E. Kearney, Pope John XXIII named St. John Fisher, martyred bishop of Rochester, England, as heavenly patron for the Diocese of Rochester, N.Y. According to Father Robert F. McNamara's book, *The Diocese of Rochester in America*, Bishop Kearney had (as bishop of Salt Lake City) attended the 1935 ceremony in which Bishop Fisher was canonized alongside Thomas More. Both men were martyred for their refusal to sign the Act of Succession, acknowledging the children of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn as legitimate heirs to the throne.

from the worldwide calendar in a reform designed to ensure that events in the life of Christ were not overshadowed.

"At the time of the 'downgrading,'" CNS reported, "the Vatican went to great pains to explain that the saints involved were still saints and still worthy of veneration and emulation."

Father Volino agreed that Catholics today can learn from the story of St. Christopher, just as Jesus often taught his followers using stories and parables.

And although the volume of canonizations in the last 25 years has led some Catholics to believe the canonization process is being taken too lightly, with the potential to exacerbate superstitions surrounding the saints, Father Volino said he is glad the pope has canonized so many people.

"I think it's a wonderful way of providing us more role models and examples of faith, which is much-needed today," he said. "It helps us to see that we can all achieve that sanctity, and to see that eternity is within our grasp."

GENERAL

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