

## SAINTS: Past, Present, Future



### Christopher News Notes

**A MEMBER OF THE CLERGY ASKED A CHILD, "What do you think a saint is?"**

The child, remembering the figures in the stained-glass windows at church, answered, "A saint is someone the light shines through." There are many saints (and saintly figures) among us today through whom God's light shines. Some are the canonized saints we know from church, while others have taken the word of God to heart and live their ordinary lives in extraordinary ways.

We must also remember that saints are human, prone to doubt, discouragement, fear, and anger, like all of us. But because God is their Prime Mover, they never give up. With Christ in them, they are light in the darkness.

## Who are Saints?

“All the faithful of Christ, whatever their rank and status, are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity,” says the Catholic Church’s constitution. Throughout its history, the Church has publicly declared that some people have led heroic lives in the service of God. These are the canonized saints. Because each person is a unique creation in unique circumstances, holiness is expressed in a multitude of ways. That’s why there is such a range of saints: beggars and royalty, scholars and soldiers, single and married women and men, popes, artists, and religious.

They give their lives over to God, but that does not mean they are unable to appreciate good things in this world. Joan of Arc loved horses; Charles Borromeo was a great chess player; John of the Cross enjoyed music. What saints have in common is an ardent love of God and commitment to His people.

- Elizabeth of Hungary was a married woman, a mother, and princess. She emptied the palace cupboards to feed the poor and started a hospital-hospice where she cared for patients herself. Her life was ruled by a fiery love of God and compassion for others.
- Martin de Porres, the son of a Black slave, was a Dominican Brother in Lima, Peru. He excused the faults of others and forgave the bitterest injuries. He comforted the sick and aided the poor. His prayerful life and love for all earned him the name “Martin of Charity.”
- Francis of Assisi saw God’s love revealed in the universe. He offers an example of genuine respect for the integrity of all life, all creation. What he taught centuries ago has the same importance today: everyone has dignity because everyone is a child of God.

- Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini came to the United States from Italy to serve the growing population of immigrants through her schools, hospitals, and orphanages. On the day of her canonization in 1946, Cardinal Samuel Stritch of Chicago said, “She is telling us that if we love Christ with all our soul, in the very conditions of our lives, we shall be holy and pleasing to Him.”

Whether recognized by the title “saint” or not, people of every race, culture, and creed have dedicated themselves to the task of making a better world by promoting God’s justice, mercy, and peace. In our own times, saints are all around us.

## What are Signs of Holiness?

A holy person is prayerful, loving, forgiving, just, faithful to commitments, full of peace and joy, and compassionate.

- **A prayerful spirit:** “Prayer,” said St. Teresa of Ávila, “is a heart-to-heart conversation with God whom we know loves us.” Saints are people of prayer through Scripture reading, meditation, liturgy, words, and deeds. Responding to God’s loving presence and radiating it to others is an integral part of the daily life of holy people. The story goes that someone ran through a city shouting, “We must put God in our lives!” Hearing this, an old monk said, “You are wrong. God is already in our lives. Our task is simply to recognize that.”
- **A spirit of love:** In his First Epistle, John the Apostle wrote, “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3:18). Such love accepts each person as equally loved by God and makes a commitment to the welfare of others. Many years ago, Rev. Pierre Raphael served as chaplain at New York’s Rikers Island prison, where he worked with Sister Simone, a French nun. “They are living saints,” said a guard. “The prisoners respect them because they do everything for them: they counsel them, they give them feelings that prisoners do not usually get from one another.”
- **Readiness to forgive:** The ability to forgive

*“Come, you that are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you gave Me clothing, I was sick and you took care of Me, I was in prison and you visited Me. ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of My family, you did it to Me.”*

—Matthew 25:34-36, 40

injuries and hurts, however difficult, is a sure sign of holiness. Eileen Egan, a founder of Pax Christi, spent most of her life advocating non-violence. Mugged and badly injured by a man who was later arrested, she wrote to her assailant from her wheelchair: “He should realize he is precious in the sight of God and has the divine Spirit in him, as does everyone else, and he should express that spirit.”

- **A strong sense of justice:** Religion cannot be restricted to private concerns. Caring for others includes the welfare of the whole community. Pope John Paul II called for “a decisive commitment to justice, respect for human rights, morality and honesty in private life, denouncing all that harms the common good and peaceful coexistence.”

For instance, Dorothy Day opened dozens of houses of hospitality to give food, shelter, and clothing to the poor. And Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers, struggled to improve their lives until his death in 1993. He said, “I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of humanity, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally non-violent struggle for justice. To be human is to suffer for others.”

- **Fidelity to commitment:** Through her “Little Way,” St. Thérèse of Lisieux explained that life should be lived with selflessness and generosity “always doing the tiniest thing right and doing it for love.” Many are faithful to commitments at great sacrifice. Clergy and religious serve their people. Mothers and fathers care for their children. Spouses and single people all struggle to live Gospel values in their own ways.

Dr. Francis P. Sing of McLean, Virginia, was a Chinese graduate student in the United States when the Chinese revolution erupted. As a result, he was not permitted to return to his wife and children. The doctor had to live apart from them for 25 years, yet he remained faithful to his Catholic marriage vows. When China’s political climate changed, the Sing family finally reunited in America.

- **A spirit of peace and joy:** Sister Thea Bowman, the granddaughter of slaves, became a Franciscan nun. As she was dying of cancer in 1990, she said, “I have tried to make a day-by-day decision that I want to live joyfully. I want to be good news to other people, so I try to laugh, to smile. I try to find the source of inner joy and strength.” Dom Joseph Marmion expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote, “Joy is the echo of God’s life in us.”
- **A spirit of compassion:** Compassion is more than kind words; it is expressed in deeds. A retired electrician served dinner at a soup kitchen for many years. One winter night, he noticed

one homeless guest wrapping plastic bags around torn sneakers. The volunteer took off his new shoes and cheerfully gave them to him. He then trudged home in his socks.

Every human being is called to holiness. Therefore, human beings of all races, cultures, and creeds have shown signs of great holiness. In India, Vinoba Bhave, a Hindu follower of Gandhi, devoted his life to serving the poorest of the poor. He walked from one village to the next, asking landowners to donate some land to them, calling upon their spirit of compassion for suffering fellow-beings. Over time, he obtained more than four million acres of land for the poor.

## What are the Fruits of Holiness?

During the Last Supper, Jesus showed us the way to be holy. He washed the feet of His disciples and asked us to follow His example. Catherine Doherty did just that. The founder of the Madonna House Lay Apostolate in Combermere, Ontario, Canada, Doherty wrote, “I am the only nurse in an area of 150 miles. I go out at eight in the morning and come back at midnight. I became sick myself, but now I am better and must return to my patients: they are Christ, so they must come first.”

The most perfect example of holiness is Mary, a Jewish teenager who said, “Yes,” to God. Her faith and acceptance of God’s will changed the course of history. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was not a passive spectator. She participated in her Son’s life, and she stood by the cross as He died. Through the power of God, Mary gave us the perfect fruit of her love: our Lord and Savior.

Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:16). Saints challenge us to live the commandment of love. They inspire us to follow their example, not necessarily in the details of their vocation, but in their generosity of spirit. God wants each of us in every generation to be holy, to serve the human family, to make His life and will our own.

  
**“It’s better to light one candle  
 than to curse the darkness.”**

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