

SAINT IT!

By D.M. FLYNN

Every family has them. There are stories about the relative dubbed Daddy Fix-It. Without formal training he could repair anything from the children's toys to the family washing machine. Anecdotes about Nana are hardly lacking either. A European immigrant, she never mastered the complexities of English, but her family feasts surpassed the efforts of every gourmet chef in town. Then there are the tales of the frugal aunt and uncle who raised ten children. They sold their empty nest to buy an RV (recreational vehicle), then spent their wisdom years travelling around the country visiting family and friends. Yes, every family has them: the heroes who have gone on before us while their legends live on.

Family members spend many enjoyable hours poring over photo albums and recalling such tales. These stories inspire us and help to shape our family heritage. In our increasingly mobile society, they not only influence our identities, they impart a sense of unity. Perhaps that explains the popularity of genealogy in recent years. As our kinfolk uproot and transplant themselves, we feel the need to maintain our family tree. We seek roots in every sense of the word.

Our Catholic family also has its heroes and their legends: we call them saints. Their stories inspire us and shape our Catholic heritage. These tales testify to the kinds of lives that are appropriate for God's holy people. Our lineage spans thousands of years, making it impossible to trace all of it - not here, not ever. But the following pages give us a glimpse of our Judeo-Christian family album.

SAINTS: SET APART

To the average Catholic, the word *saint* refers to deceased persons whom the church has officially canonized for their lives of service to God and their neighbours. But the canon - or list - of saints could not possibly include everyone who lived a life of virtue. Moreover, the definition of *saint* has evolved over the centuries.

The word translated as *saint* from both Hebrew and Greek originally referred to gods, beings "set apart." The ancient Israelites viewed God as transcending his creation and therefore worthy of worship. They believed that God alone was "holy, *sanctus*," set apart ("sanctuaried"), distinct, unique. "Holiness" set God apart from the profane, the ordinary: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" (Is 6:3).

When God entered into a covenant with the Israelites, they were set apart from the other nations. "You are a people sacred to the Lord, your God; he has chosen you from all the nations on the face of the earth to be a people peculiarly his own" (Dt 7:6). With this privilege comes a responsibility: "Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy" (Lv 19:2). Now the Israelites are God's chosen ones, a "holy people," or "saints," who are called to imitate the divine attributes.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul refers to the early Christians as saints because, as a community, they were set apart from their nonbelieving neighbours. The Christians were now God's own people, "the holy ones in Christ Jesus" (Ph 1:1). They, too, bear the task of emulating the Divine: "Put on the

new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth" (Ep 4:24). Eventually the term saint referred to Christians who lived exemplary lives of virtue and simplicity, whose lifestyles served to inspire others.

CHRISTIANS AT THE CATACOMBS

A cross-stitch sampler reads, "When someone you love becomes a memory, that memory becomes a treasure." As we peruse our family albums, we inevitably find the last photo taken of loved ones whose earthly lives are now memories. By visiting their graves and decorating the gravesites, we show that we treasure those memories.

The ancient Israelites regarded death as the passage from life to Sheol (she-OHL), a dark place of confinement, but not one of punishment. In Sheol one was estranged from God: "Who among the dead remembers you? Who praises you in Sheol?" (Ps 6:6). From the moment of death, there were displays of grief, shown in clothing and in loud laments, wailing, and weeping.

Proper burial was required. To leave a body "for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field" (1 S 14:44) was an insult to God's creation. Poor people were buried in common graveyards. The wealthy had vaults dug into the hillsides. The entryway was closed with a circular stone slab. Families might have several interconnected rooms. Bodies were laid on shelves carved out for that purpose.

The Jewish Christians also, of course, honoured the memory of their loved ones. At first they simply continued their Jewish practices, burying their dead amid laments and dirges. The resurrection of Jesus, however, changed their mourning into joy: "We do not want you to be unaware about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope" (1 Th 4:13). These new Christians, then, regarded the graves of their loved ones as a temporary resting place, not a final one. The word *cemetery* comes from a Greek word meaning dormitory, sleeping room.

Christian burial customs continued to reflect the Jewish emphasis of respect for the body as God's creation. To this end, Christians choose modest ground burial in common graveyards. During the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Christians made an effort to identify the graves of martyrs. They viewed death as a birthday: birth of a new life with God, as Jesus had promised. They occasionally gathered at these sites on the anniversaries of the martyrs' deaths to rejoice and commemorate their lives.

In the 3rd century, Christians were buried in the catacombs, which were probably extensions of the hillside vaults of the wealthy. The catacombs were not used as a refuge for Christians during times of persecution. In the 4th century, however, they too were the site of memorial services. Here they celebrated the Eucharist "in memory of those athletes who have gone before, and to train and make ready those who are to come hereafter."¹

¹ From "The Martyrdom of Polycarp," 2nd century.

LOCAL CALENDARS AND CANONIZATION

As we turn the pages in our family album, we come upon photographs of those who sacrificed their lives in the service of others - a widower uncle who refused to place his handicapped child in an institution despite pressure from doctors and family; an aunt who renounced marriage and children in order to care for her aging parents. They may not have died for their cause, but they laid down their lives nonetheless.

To the Jewish community, a martyr was someone who was deeply devoted to God and lived life of exemplary piety and holiness. The martyr, or "witness," testified to the manner of life appropriate for God's chosen people. To the new Christians a martyr was one who endured, not for the faith, but *because of* it. Faith allowed one to be "strengthened with every power, in accord with [God's] glorious might, for all endurance and patience, with joy giving thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light" (Col 1:11-12). The Book of Revelation refers to martyrs as those who gave their life for Jesus Christ. In later centuries martyrs came to mean those who willingly died for their beliefs.

Christians faced persecutions until the peace of Constantine in the early 4th century. Recalling the acts of the martyrs served to inspire the community in the face of opposition. Each church had its own list of local heroes or saints. As intolerance subsided, martyrdom became uncommon. Christians now looked for new heroes to emulate. People who led extremely virtuous lives, especially those who lived in voluntary poverty, were included in the local calendar of saints. There were no formal criteria for sainthood: the devotion of the community was the sole requirement to set them apart.

Over the centuries the lists of saints swelled and abuses occurred. Family legends often become exaggerated as time passes; the sagas of the saints suffered the same fate. Consequently, the bishops began to set norms for calling people saints within their dioceses. In 1234 Pope Gregory ix declared that the sole route to official sainthood was papal canonization. Formal canonization has seen many changes since then. The most recent revision came in 1983, but the devotion of the community is still an essential element. The lengthy and complex process begins when one or more persons submit a request to the bishop to examine the life of a deceased hero.

ALL THE SAINTS

Sometimes, as we look through our family photographs, we are surprised to discover an uneven representation of our relatives. Some people appear in almost every picture while others appear only rarely. Whatever the reason for this, as families grow it becomes increasingly difficult to photograph the entire clan.

Similarly, as our family of saints grew larger in number than the days in a year, it became impossible to assign a specific day to honour each saint. The obvious solution was to select a day to honour all the saints, known and

unknown, who did not have a personal feast day. Various places chose different days for this. November 1, the first day of Celtic winter, was the feast of all the saints in Ireland. It was not until the 9th century that November 1 became the feast of All Saints for the entire church. While we celebrate the memory of all saints, we adore God alone. We pray to the saints to intercede with God for us. We venerate saints; we worship God alone. The distinction may be subtle, but it is significant. As Lawrence Cunningham observed, the saints “give us the encouragement to be more self-giving, more loving, less inclined to hate, more compelled to love. They invite us, in short, to transcend ourselves.”²

The Solemnity of All Saints is a day to honour those saints whom the Church formally recognizes for their lives of service to God and their neighbours. It is also a day when we can remember our loved ones who have gone before us and left memories to inspire us. It is a day when we can notice the goodness of people still among us, living relatives and friends who challenge us to be the person God calls us to be.

At baptism each one of us was set apart for God. We became members of “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 P 2:9). Through baptism God lays claim to us, enabling us to become divine instruments. Whatever our situation in life, we are to imitate the divine attributes, to live virtuous lives, and to bear witness to the way of life appropriate for God’s holy people.

The following stanza rarely appears in our hymnals despite its powerful imagery:

For martyrs, who with rapture-kindled eye
saw the bright crown descending from the sky
and, seeing, grasped it, Thee we glorify.³

We, too, must grasp the crown, not necessarily by dying for our faith, but rather by persevering as witnesses who, through faith, live as God’s image and likeness. Now it is our turn to be heroes and heroines for others, to “saint it,” to act like saints. Our lives will then inspire a future generation of saints and help to shape their Catholic heritage.

REFLECTION

Reflect on / share your experience of the homespun sampler that says: “When someone you love becomes a memory, the memory becomes a treasure.”

² Lawrence S. Cunningham, *The Meaning of the Saints* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 162.

³ Marilyn Kay Stulken and Catherine Salika, *Hymnal Companion to Worship*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1998), p. 416.