

A Brief History of
Saints

LAWRENCE S. CUNNINGHAM



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Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Introduction	1
1 <i>The Saint: Beginnings</i>	5
Beginnings	8
The Martyrs	11
Literature	13
Veneration	16
After Constantine	18
2 <i>The Bureaucratization of Sanctity</i>	28
Liturgical Memory of the Saints	28
The Sainthood Legend	31
Regularizing Sainthood	36
A Test Case: Francis of Assisi	39
The Christian East	44
The Many Meanings of the Saints	46
Pilgrimage	49
Venerating Saints: A Theological Clarification	51
3 <i>Reformations: Protestant and Catholic</i>	54
The Age of the Reformers	54

The Catholic Reformation	61
The New Martyrs	68
The Papal Curia and Canonization	72
The Saints and Scholarship	74
4 <i>Towards the Modern World</i>	78
Worlds Divided	78
New Forms of Religious Life	81
Doctors of the Church	87
The <i>Starets</i>	91
The Tractarians and the Saints	96
5 <i>The Twentieth Century</i>	102
Schools of Spirituality	102
A New Saintliness?	107
The New Martyrs	115
John Paul II: Saints and Evangelization	120
Anglican and Lutheran Calendars	123
6 <i>The Saints, World Religions, and the Future</i>	127
Some Terminology	130
Saints as a Theological Resource	136
Saints and the Continuity of Religious Tradition	139
Appendix I: Patron Saints	148
Appendix II: Iconography of the Saints	151
Notes	155
Select Bibliography	162
Index	169

List of Illustrations

1	Procession of saints in the Church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy	30
2	Saint Francis of Assisi (?1181–1226)	40
3	Saint Francis Xavier (1506–1551)	64
4	The colonnaded arcade around St Peter's Square, Rome	67
5	A woodcut from <i>Foxe's Book of Martyrs</i> (1563)	70
6	The Altar of the Chair in St Peter's Basilica, Rome	90
7	An icon of Saint Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833)	94
8	Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948)	112
9	Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997)	113
10	Edith Stein (Teresa Benedicta of the Holy Cross, 1891–1942)	117
11	Westminster Abbey's homage to the contemporary martyrs	119

Introduction

The popular American singer, Billy Joel, sings a lyric in which he confesses that he would rather “laugh with the sinner / than cry with the saints.” By contrast, the old New Orleans jazz favorite “When the Saints Go Marching in” insists that “I want to be among that number . . .” These two popular songs indicate the two polar images of saints: on the one hand, dreary, pinched, and lugubrious mourners and haters of a good time and, on the other, the glorious end of human life.

The matter of the saints is not made easier because we are the heirs of a long artistic tradition, most amply documented in old Roman Catholic churches, of figures who seem to have lived in a distant past and whose background is almost always depicted in gold leaf. Many Catholics of a certain age have had their image of saints shaped profoundly by holy cards, stained-glass windows, garishly polychromed plaster-of-Paris statues, as well as innumerable paintings that are often jejeune and sentimental. Some of this older art is valued as works of high culture, while a good deal of it found in local parishes is luridly bad. Some saints are identified with ethnic pride. In the city where I reside, the churches founded by immigrant communities in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tell an informed person where the communities originated because the newcomers brought their patronal saints with them: Saint Patrick (Ireland), Saint Bavo (Belgium), Saint Adalbert (Poland), Saint Stephen (Hungary), Saint Antony of Padua (Italy), and so on.

It is also true that some saints have found admirers because they have been sentimentalized to fit the age. Every self-respecting suburban garden center can supply a concrete statue of Saint Francis with a bird perched on his shoulder, and over thirty filmmakers, going back before the “talkies,” have given us versions of Saint Joan of Arc. Other saints, like Valentine (there were actually two martyrs of that name), have become submerged into the popular sentimentality of the greeting-card companies and chocolate manufacturers. Chicago’s Saint Patrick’s Day includes turning the city’s river green with vegetable dye. The mutation of the Eastern Saint Nicholas of Myra into Santa Claus will be narrated in its proper place. One must decide whether the sentimentality of the religious person or that of the secular one is the more misleading.

This brief history of saints will focus on the roots, development, and significance of the saints in the Christian tradition in general and in the Roman Catholic tradition more particularly. My decision to emphasize the Roman Catholic Church in this work derives from a twofold conviction. First, one should speak only about those things about which one knows something. As a Roman Catholic teaching in a Catholic university, one of my research interests has been the meaning and significance of the saints, but in the course of my work I have kept my eye on the tradition of the saints in other Christian communities and that interest will be honored in this work. Second, most readers in the West are more familiar with the Roman Catholic tradition of the saints if for no other reason than that most of our major museums well represent that tradition, and, further, that our popular culture still has lingering memories of the old tradition of the cult of the saints, even if most people could not say who the aforementioned Saint Valentine was or how Saint Nicholas

became Santa Claus. We will pay a fair amount of attention to the Christian East because Orthodoxy does share a robust cult of the saints, even though many who do not belong to that ancient Christian tradition are unfamiliar with it.

There will be more than one occasion in this work when the argument will be made that the tradition of the saints should be of interest to others besides social historians, students of iconography, folklorists, and experts in popular religion. In fact, given the current rise in serious concerns about the nature and practice of Christian spirituality, the lives of the saints, both ancient and contemporary, provide a precious resource for that interest. The tradition of the saints is, in fact, an under-used resource for theological reflection. Moreover, as the final chapter will suggest, the tradition of the “Friends of God” is a possible launching point for serious inter-religious dialogue. After all, as Pope John Paul II observed in his encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), authentic dialogue should begin as an “exchange of gifts.” One great gift that Christianity possesses is the unbroken witness of heroic figures, both men and women, who have exemplified this or that aspect of the Christian life. Other traditions have their own exemplary figures to tell us about.

We shall also see that the subject of saints in the long tradition of Christianity is a complex one. Many saints are known to us only by name to which fantastic folktales have become appended with imagination supplying what history lacks. Other saints strike us as odd, outrageous, or eccentric. The late medieval mystic Richard Rolle was so peculiar that his sister cried out: *Frater meus insanus est* (My brother is bonkers). Still others were luminous in their person to an extent that even today they have an allure for the contemporary seeker. Very early in this work we will have to spend some energy trying to figure out a usable description of what it is that we are talking about. This will not be an easy task as will soon become patent.

This brief work has six chapters that follow an historical trajectory from the beginnings of the Christian story down to the

present. Of necessity, it tells that story at a rather brisk pace. The enormous amount of both primary and secondary literature on the saints necessitates picking and choosing. An incomplete bibliography of literature on the saints, published two decades ago in Stephen Wilson's *Saints and their Cults* (1983), had over thirteen hundred items in it. Cascades of studies continue to appear each year and from angles that are quite diverse. The modest bibliography at the end of this book includes three bibliographical essays done by myself which indicate a partial list of works, mainly books, that came to my attention in the 1990s. The Select Bibliography includes a number of resources for the study of saints. With some very important exceptions, I have limited that bibliography to items in the English language.

The vast body of secondary literature on the saints, almost impossible to be mastered by a single person, necessitated a certain selectivity not only about what is touched on in this short book but how it should be treated. Nobody could be more conscious than I am of how quickly this book slides over vexatious issues or generalizes where more nuance might have been expected. Readers must see this work as only a first word, while I live in hope that it spurs further reading and reflection.

A number of people have assisted me in finishing this project. I am in debt to the chair of the Department of Theology, Professor John Cavadini, for creating such a wonderful academic community within which to work. Reverend Professor Richard McBrien, himself a student of the saints, has been generous with his time and his knowledge, as has Reverend Professor Maxwell Johnson whose assistance with matters liturgical, including the use of some of his books, has been a great help. The editorial staff of Blackwell Publishing have been most supportive. I would like to give particular thanks to Rebecca Harkin, who recruited me for this task, and Sophie Gibson, who saw it through to its finish.

This little book, as always, is for the three women in my life: my wife Cecilia and my daughters Sarah Mary and Julia Clare.

Chapter 1

The Saint: Beginnings

A Saint is a peculiar being.

John Henry Newman

Alban Butler (1711–73), descended from a distinguished recusant family from Northhamptonshire, was sent by his family to the English College at Douai on the continent where he became, in time, one of its professors. Ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1735, he labored, mainly on the continent, but with occasional visits back to England, for thirty years to complete research in order to write his *The Lives of the Saints*, which was published in London in four huge octavo volumes between 1756 and 1759. Subsequent editions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appeared in Dublin and Edinburgh. *The Lives of the Saints* is part of that central library of recusant literature associated with Douai in France, which takes its place with such works as the Douai–Rheims translation of the Bible from the Latin Vulgate (the Roman Catholic alternative to the Authorized Version) and the very popular manual of prayers known as *The Garden of the Soul*. These three works – *The Lives of the Saints*, the Douai–Rheims Bible, and the prayer book – were staples of Roman Catholic life in English-speaking countries well into the twentieth century. My father used a copy of *The Garden of the Soul* (inherited from his father) for his devotions well into the 1960s.

In the twentieth century, there were augmentations and corrections to the original volumes of Butler's *Lives* under various editors, first in 1928 by Herbert Thurston, SJ, and in the 1950s by the same editor and the late Donald Attwater. The last edition in twelve volumes (one for each month of the year) was published in the 1990s under the general editorship of Paul Burns.¹ The work as a whole, edited and updated as it has been, has never gone out of print, even though it has only been this final edition that has appeared in twelve volumes. It will require further updating soon given the pace of canonizations and beatifications under the pontificate of John Paul II.

Butler's *Lives* is organized according to the months of the year. Each day records the saints of the Catholic Church who are venerated either universally in the Roman calendar or locally in a specific geographical area or within a particular religious order. The entries in Butler try to reflect all of the saints who appear in the authoritative Roman martyrology,² although it cannot take into account all the saints beatified or canonized by Pope John Paul II since 1995.

One can open any of the volumes of Butler's *Lives* to any day to see immediately why we can speak of the saints as a "problem" in the sense that one finds it hard, frequently, to know what the persons listed for a given day have in common. The entries for May 30 are not atypical. We commemorate on that day the feast of Saints Basil and Emmelia, whose claim to fame is that they were the parents of four great fourth-century Cappadocian figures: Saints Gregory of Nyssa, Peter of Sebastea, Basil the Great, and Macrina the Younger. The same day also commemorates the seventh-century martyr Saint Dymrna about whom we know nothing; what is told of her in the hagiographical tradition, is, in fact, all derived from folktales. Further, we also note an entry on Saint Hubert, who is alleged to be the founder of the town of Liège in Belgium but whose body is now in the French Ardennes city of St Hubert. He is the patron of hunters (because his life

story was confused with that of Saint Eustace – the conflation of the lives of the saints is not uncommon) and, for unclear reasons, he is traditionally invoked against hydrophobia or rabies. We also honor, on the same day, a Spanish king, Ferdinand of Castile and a little-known English saint from Norfolk named Walstan. Better known, however, is Saint Joan of Arc who was executed for heresy, later rehabilitated, and finally canonized. Her story has so caught the popular imagination that over thirty films have been made of her life dating back to the era of silent movies. She has also been honored by dramatic plays (for example by George Bernard Shaw) and any number of works in sculpture and painting. Joan's life also illustrates the complexity of being named a saint. She was executed as a relapsed heretic on May 30, 1431. In 1456, Pope Callistus III declared that the process that had condemned her had been unjust, but it was not until 1920 that she was canonized in the papacy of Pope Benedict XV.

If, then, one came innocently to those entries in Butler's *Lives* for May 30 it would be reasonable to ask if we were speaking of a single category of person. What could possibly be the link that ties together a medieval Spanish king, a fourth-century husband and wife, semi-legendary figures like Dymphna, who is now associated with help for those suffering mental illness, and a fifteenth-century cross-dressing adolescent who heard heavenly voices (of saints who may or may not have existed in fact) which provoked her to lead an army? The short answer to the question is not much beyond the fact that they are all listed as saints in the Roman martyrology. Indeed, if one is to make any sense out of the category of "saint" as it is traditionally understood in the historic Christian church, or, at a minimum, begin to understand if this heterogeneous collection of edifying tales and moral exempla even add up to what Wittgenstein, in an inspired phrase, calls a "family resemblance," we need to sort out what is, in fact, a very complex and trying story. This first chapter will attempt to set the stage for this extremely convoluted tale.

Beginnings

The word “saint” is part of the common coinage of our language. We say that someone would “try the patience of a saint” or that one’s mother was a saint. In general, the word “saint” in the common vernacular has connotations of forbearance, self-abnegation, and service to others out of love. At a second level, we might also think of church names, figures cast in plaster-of-Paris, pictures in museums of maidens being fed to lions, medallions on chains worn about the neck depicting Saint Christopher, certain holidays like Saint Patrick’s Day, and other ephemera derived from popular Catholicism. Among those Christians who venerate the saints there is also the strong conviction that they can be instructive in attempts to live the Christian life. We learn of love for the natural world from a Saint Francis or bravery in facing a hostile, unbelieving world from the martyrs or how to pray better from spiritual masters and mistresses like the great mystics. Functionally speaking, the saints serve a variety of purposes in the historic Christian church, but taken as a whole they represent a very complex phenomenon.

It is at this second level of discourse that we find the subject of our study. We want to know how these various kinds of saints came to be, what they mean, and how they fit into the larger discourse of Christianity in general (for example, what does the creed mean by the “communion of saints”?) and Catholic Christianity (broadly understood) in particular. To answer such questions, we need both to look back into history and, at another level, to reflect critically. This work, then, has two strains within it: history and theological reflection.

We do find the word “saint” in the vernacular versions of Christian Scriptures. Saint Paul frequently uses the Greek word *agios* as a generic term for members of the early Christian communities. He greets the community at Rome who are “called to be saints” (Rom. 1: 7). He uses a similar phrase in his greeting to the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1: 2) and, in his second letter,