Culture
Book Reviews



"A Group of Saints and Angels" by Mattia Preti (1613-1699) (Artvee)



by Eric Clayton

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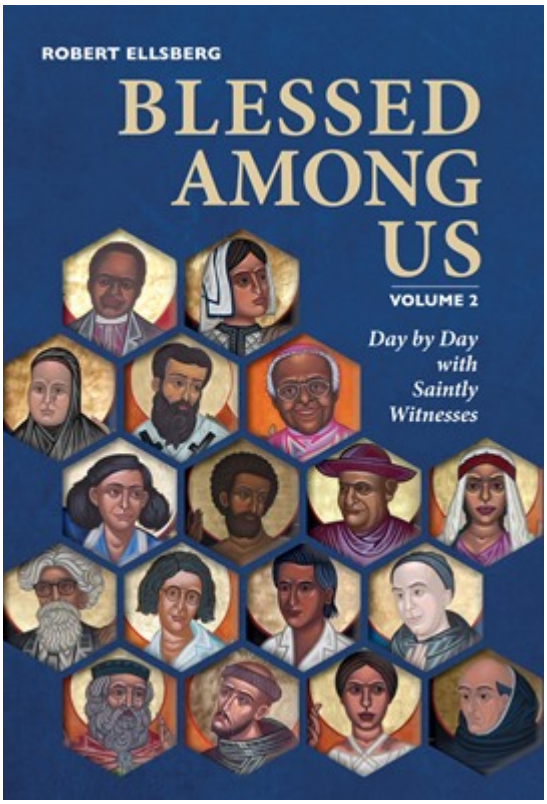
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November 1, 2025

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The first entry I read in Robert Ellsberg's latest book, *Blessed Among Us: Day by Day with Saintly Witnesses, Vol. 2*, was about St. Teresa of Avila. I knew a little about Teresa, namely that she was a Spanish mystic and the first woman to be named doctor of the church. But what I'd forgotten, or perhaps never knew, was that it wasn't until she was 39 — nearly 20 years after entering the Carmelites—that she "determined to devote herself more seriously to prayer." That made me smile. Faced with the mediocrity of my own prayer life at a similar age, that simple line gave me no small amount of encouragement. I could still follow her saintly path. Perhaps I already am. Perhaps you are, too.



Blessed Among Us: Day by Day with Saintly Witnesses, Vol. 2
Robert Ellsberg
792 pages; Liturgical Press
$39.35

Each of us is called to holiness. As Pope Francis reminded us in his 2018 apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, God "wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence." In his characteristically blunt way, Francis called us to account: God invites us to more, right here, right now. How will we respond?

St. Teresa of Avila

St. Teresa of Avila, mystic and founder of the Discalced Carmelites, and the first female declared doctor of the church, is depicted in a church in Troyes, France. (OSV News/Crosiers)

Lest we fall into spiritual navel gazing, Francis quickly challenges us to look beyond our own lives to both those saints officially recognized by the church and to the saints next door. The late pope reminds us that we become our truest self when we find our place in community. "In salvation history, the Lord saved one people. … no one is saved alone."

And so, it's not enough just for *me* to become a saint, to reach for *personal* holiness. The challenge for each of us is to look to others, to bask in the holiness all around us, to discover something unique of God at work in God's people — individually and collectively — and to treasure those stories of fellow pilgrims walking that long, arduous road of spiritual growth. The question, then, evolves. We look beyond our individual response to God's invitation and wonder: How does my neighbor embrace this call to holiness? How have others walked with God? How has God's Spirit touched lives vastly differently than my own, and transformed them? Ultimately, how is God calling me into this communion of saints, and how might I learn from and accompany others? The Spirit invites us to cultivate a disposition of holy curiosity about the stories of others.

There are few as qualified as Robert Ellsberg to help us respond to these questions. Ellsberg, publisher and editor-in-chief of Orbis Books, has published several award-winning books on the saints — both canonized and not. *Blessed Among Us, Vol. 2,* published this year by Liturgical Press, is simply his latest offering. Each day of the calendar year, Ellsberg provides us with two saintly snapshots. (Ellsberg's first volume, *Blessed Among Us*, was published in 2016 by Liturgical Press.)

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Those who know Give Us This Day, the popular daily prayer resource also from Liturgical Press, may find many of these summaries familiar: Ellsberg has contributed the "Blessed Among Us" feature since its inception in 2011. Still, having

all these stories woven together and presented in a single volume to accompany us throughout the year is spiritually nourishing. From Hagar to Mother Mary Lange, from St. Valentine to Mister Rogers, this collection finds holiness across time and space. The synopses are short and punchy, offering us a sketch of a holy life into which we may breathe our own particularities. Each concludes with a quote either spoken by or spoken about the holy person in question.

And so perhaps you, like me, will find echoes of your own journey in these stories of women and men from our shared spiritual ancestry. A line here, an image there; we never know what of another's story will illuminate our own. And so we must proceed with that holy curiosity, always wondering about God at work in another so as to better understand God at work in our own lives. After all, we go to salvation together — it's nice to know with whom we walk.

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