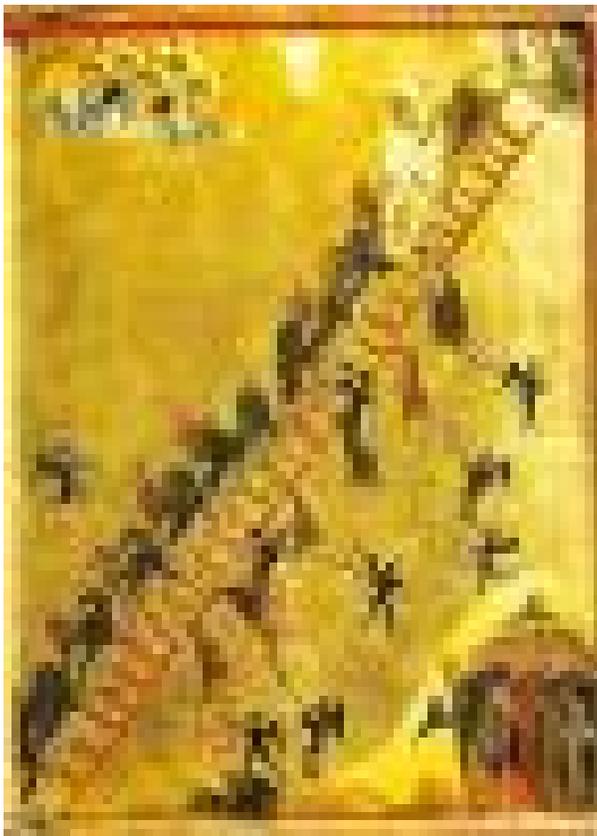


## Saintly figures: Bowman, Rahner and Climacus

Richard McBrien | Mar. 23, 2009 Essays in Theology

On March 30 the church observes the day of death and entrance into eternal glory of three saintly figures. One is recognized as such by the universal church; the other two have not been formally raised to sainthood.

John Climacus (ca. 570-ca. 649) had been married early in life but became a monk after his wife's death. After living in community for a while, he took up life as a hermit. His only contact with others would occur at Mass with other hermits on weekends.



It was while John was living in solitude that he wrote the work

that gave him his name, Climacus, which in Latin means "ladder." The work was titled *The Ladder to Paradise*.

It was a volume on monastic spirituality, cataloguing the virtues and vices of monastic life, of both the communal and eremetical type. He held up *apatheia* (Greek, "passive disinterestedness") as the ideal virtue, because it represented a complete mastery over one's feelings and emotions.

Although one does not see North American Catholics today with their noses buried in this book, hoping to find the surest route to heaven, *The Ladder to Paradise* has had great influence in the East over the centuries.

It has been translated into Syriac, Arabic, Georgian, Armenian, Slavonic, Rumanian, and Russian, and is read

today in Orthodox monasteries during Lent. It was translated into Latin by Franciscans in the 14th century.

Lest the reader of this column hastily conclude that John Climacus was an other-worldly type with whom no ordinary person nowadays could identify, it should be pointed out that he was careful not to exalt the soul at the expense of the body. "How can I run away from [my body]," he wrote, "when it will be my companion at the resurrection?"

We strive not for the liberation of the soul from the body, but "a body made holy" or better, made whole. Although asceticism and obedience are indispensable tools of the spiritual life, he insisted, they are useless without faith, hope, and love, which "bind and secure the unity of the whole."

At around the age of 70, John Climacus was chosen as abbot of Mount Sinai, but after four years in that position he returned to his hermitage. He died about five or six years later.

His feast is not on the General Roman Calendar followed in the Catholic church, but it is celebrated in the East on the fourth Sunday of Lent as well as on March 30 by the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches.



This is also the day on which Karl Rahner, S.J. (1904-84), the greatest Catholic theologian of the 20th century, died. Rahner's theological work, so reflective of that of St. Thomas Aquinas, was sacramental in character. It was always centered on grace as the presence of God in the individual human person and in the whole created order.

For Rahner, religious experience is not to be found or sought in some separate or exotic compartment of life, but in its ordinary moments and events.

His vision of the church was not only that of a sacrament of Christ, but of a "world church." For him, salvation is available to all people of good will. The church is the sign and instrument of what a loving and compassionate God is doing on behalf of everyone, both inside and outside the Body of Christ.

Toward the end of his life he is reported to have said that, as a writer and teacher, he had "tried in this ordinary everyday way to serve God." And indeed he did.



Finally, March 30 is also the day of death of Sr. Thea Bowman (1937-90), an African American Franciscan, who helped to found the Institute of Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans. The institute became the base for her many lectures and workshops around the country.

In 1984, the same year that Fr. Rahner died, Sr. Thea learned that she had breast cancer. Nevertheless she continued her speaking and her travels, and in the process contributed to the ongoing transformation of the Catholic church in the United States.

Toward the end of her life, she had become bald from her chemotherapy treatments and was confined to a wheelchair. Her prayer in her remaining years was: "Lord, let me live until I die," that is, "to live, love, and serve fully until death comes."

"I don't make sense of suffering," she once said, "I try to make sense of life."

Saints are primarily exemplars, not intercessors. These three fit that profile very well.

(This column was adapted from Fr. McBrien's *Lives of the Saints* (HarperOne). © 2009 Richard P. McBrien. All rights reserved. Fr. McBrien is the Crowley-O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.)

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