

A steady, ever renewable stream of saints

Richard McBrien | Oct. 26, 2009 Essays in Theology

The feast of All Saints will be celebrated this coming Sunday. I was surprised that I had devoted only three columns to this feast, and those in the years 1994, 1996, and 2002. I am retrieving some of their main points in this week's column with the hope that they might be of enduring value, both theologically and spiritually.

The 1994 column began: "The feast of All Saints, on Nov. 1, provides an annual reminder that there are many more saints in heaven than the relatively few who have been officially recognized by the church.

"For every St. Francis of Assisi or St. Rose of Lima there are thousands of unknown and long forgotten mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, cousins, friends, neighbors, co-workers, nurses, teachers, manual laborers, and other individuals in various kinds of occupations who lived holy lives that were consistent with the values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

"Although each is in eternal glory, none of their names is attached to a liturgical feast, a parish church, a pious society, or any other ecclesiastical institution. The catch-all feast that we celebrate next week is all the recognition they're ever going to receive from the church."

However, the church does not canonize saints simply to honor them, or, what is even farther from the mark, to honor their religious orders.

"The church makes saints in order to provide a steady, ever renewable stream of exemplars, or sacraments, of Christ, lest our following of Christ be reduced to some kind of abstract, intellectual exercise.

"Saints help us understand what the Gospel demands of us as disciples of Christ. Saints also help us understand the nature and purpose of the church.

"If the church only canonized priests and nuns, for example, it would be teaching a seriously faulty message: namely, that the ideal Christian is a celibate, unlike the 95 percent who marry and raise families.

"Unfortunately, the great majority of those whom the church has canonized -- and continues to canonize -- are celibate priests and nuns."

Two years later, I pointed out that "in this modern age it would be highly unlikely for a married person of truly heroic virtue to be canonized unless, upon the death of their spouse, she or he founded or entered a religious order.

"There are three reasons for this imbalance between celibate and married canonized saints: the first two are financial and political, the third is theological.

"It costs a great deal of money to move a canonization forward over the course of many years, and, therefore, one needs the backing of a large and powerful organization, usually a religious order, not only to provide the

necessary financial resources but also to have the Vatican take the petition seriously.

But money and influence alone do not account for the disproportionate number of celibate clergy and religious on the official list of saints. The theological factor has always been the crucial one.

For centuries many church leaders, theologians, and spiritual writers regarded marriage (and the sexual intimacy that is intrinsic to it) as the lesser of two evils. It is better to marry than to burn, St. Paul insisted (1 Corinthians 7:9).

After St. Paul, the theology of marriage went from bad to worse. Thus, the Fathers of the church, particularly St. Augustine, laid the groundwork for the medieval view of marriage as a lawful remedy for concupiscence. For Augustine marriage had no other purpose than to produce children. Sexual desires are the unfortunate effects of Original Sin, and Original Sin itself is transmitted through the sexual union of husband and wife.

The Second Vatican Council began the slow process of putting things right, but it has been almost 45 years since its adjournment and the church continues to canonize a disproportionate number of priests and nuns.

The theology that underlies our annual feast of All Saints, I wrote in 2002, is aptly expressed in the council's Dogmatic Constitution on the church: In the lives of those companions of ours who are more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ, God shows, vividly, to humanity his presence and his face.

He speaks to us in them and offers us a sign of his Kingdom, to which we are powerfully attracted, so great a cloud of witness are we given and such an affirmation of the truth of the Gospel.

The quotation is from article 50. What is true of saints is true of the church, the column concluded. It is a communion of saints and, as such, a light to the nations.

These reflections, I believe, remain valid today.

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