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Sainthood without Saintliness

Ken Briggs | Dec. 24, 2009 NCR Today

While I was growing up, I was always aware, at least subliminally, that there were certain rare people in the little churches we went to who held the whole thing together through their faith and compassion.

Later I understood what St. Paul meant by "all the saints" he was corresponding with. They were ordinary Christians, largely anonymous and unheralded, who simply lived the Gospel.

They weren't always models of perfection. A father of a friend of mine, a man whose nature was loving, sang in the choir, led a prayer meeting, visited old people in the hospital and sometimes chased women, with what results I don't know. He was no angel but we thought he was God's UPS man.

Same with a woman who brought hope to people suffering from all sorts of mental and spiritual ills. She'd listen and minister to them with no fanfare. One day we discovered that in her role as church treasurer she'd made off with $5,000 (a tidy sum then) to bail her husband out of perilous gambling debts.

In those days, the Catholic system of sainthood was even more remote than Catholicism itself. It was a bit spooky and kind of super hall-of-famy populated by those who had just appeared to be human.

The two images have continued to exist far apart. I think of the small "s" saints to whom I've been grateful and never known quite what to do with the big "S" saints who emerge from the Vatican. While I now understand about the long, often costly campaigns that installs them, I've never been able to see saints essentially as set aside from other people by some qualities others don't have.

These days, with ubiquitous technology collecting information on us from the day we're born, making it past the surveillance tests without being detected with seriousl flaws would seem impossible. Yet, even as the IRS and FBI and other agencies were just honing these devices, John Paul II rushed into the breach to create more saints than did all other popes combined. Almost as if he were racing to beat a deadline.

With high stakes involved in the Vatican process, it is understandable that images would get burnished to smooth the way. Occasionally there is a bump in the road : Junipero Serra, the founder of the string of California missions, was derailed at least for a time when some unflattering historical accounts of his dealings with native Americans showed up.

I like the move to make Pius XII a saint precisely because it raises some of these matters and brings the saint discussion back down to ground. If he is to be made a saint, it seems to me that it would have to be done in acknowledgement that Pius's record of behavior lingers under serious suspiciosn. If it could be done without rationalizing bad behavior or attempts to make it disappear, then it would be tough but fair. I'm among those who doubts that Pius did the right thing with regard to saving Jews and opposing Nazis, but I also recognize that the virtue of courage is a rare thing indeed. It doesn't make the behavior acceptable but plants the doer firmly on the ground with other human beings.

When St. Paul called those in the huddled enclaves of early Christianity "saints" I'm sure he had no illusions that they always returned exactly the right change to a customer or never gossiped about their neighbors. He assumed that all stood in need of mercy and that elevating some above the rest on the assumption that they didn't share these failures would be wrong.

I believe it was Chesterton who said, "It is far easier to be a saint than to live with one."

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