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We may need a hero more than we need a saint

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

John Paul II's imminent beatification has led both secular and religious media to make an old idea like sainthood new again.

For most of us, saints seem otherworldly, far removed from ordinary existence. We get images of a perfect, selfless saint or an ecstatic, medieval mystic with an oozing stigmata. They are angelic beings, far easier to pray to than relate to. It's no wonder that Dorothy Day famously quipped "Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed so easily."

As a junior in high school, I was lucky enough to be introduced to Catholic theology by my teacher Tony Marinelli, who had just published *The Word Made Flesh*, an overview of the Catholic faith written primarily for high school students.

My favorite section of his course and the book was called "Saints and Heroes." Marinelli reminds us that saints possessed a wide variety of personalities and gifts.

"They were anything but conformists. They do not even conform to each other. Each of them brings something unique to the concept of sanctity," he writes.

But what united them was how they manifested God's presence. They were each, in their own way, "channels of God's grace and love." Saints and heroes are those who, through their compassion, courage, and integrity, inspire us to transform places of brokenness, whether within ourselves or in our communities, into places of wholeness.

Marinelli also recognizes that not all of those who served as channels of holiness have been or will ever be declared saints, which is why he also teaches about "heroes of faith." It was this section that captivated

me most. It was also the first place that I read the names Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day.

This lesson was crucial for my own spiritual direction and development because it taught me the importance of seeking and finding my own spiritual heroes. Those individuals who could help me form my own conscience and whose witness would continue to give me hope when religious figures, family, colleagues, or friends would break my spirit and make me feel lost.

I found these heroes not simply in famous, larger than life figures. Anonymous spiritual heroes were equally inspiring. Like the restaurant owner I saw quietly give free meals to the hungry at his door, or the laundromat attendant who secretly let homeless people use the restroom or leave a few personal belongings safely locked up in a backroom.

One of the most striking aspects that I see in the religious worldview of young adults is not only their distrust of religious leadership, but their conviction that they do not *need* religious or spiritual leadership. Their individualistic worldview has led them to believe that their own minds are all of the spiritual authority they'll need. When crisis and uncertainty inevitably arrive, they seem to think that they won't need any help to make meaning of the situation or discern critical decisions.

For the better part of human history, young people grew up surrounded by images of deities, saints and sacred objects. They were images that were vehicles reminding them of a transcendent reality, of their own finitude, and of their dependence on the nature and the sacred. Now icons are little more than tiny pictures to be clicked; vehicles that take them to the next window where they can get stuff done quicker, faster and easier in virtual reality.

Given how adrift we are from living in communities and from participating in religious institutions, the need for spiritual heroes should be stronger than ever. Yet, the human figures that dominate our minds and imaginations are typically celebrities or the human wreckage of reality shows.

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Of course, there can always be a small exception.

Last month, ABC premiered a reality show entitled "Secret Millionaire." Each week, a millionaire was sent on a secret, undercover mission: live for one week in a poor neighborhood and seek out those individuals who are dedicating their lives to the neediest members of their community.

By day, the millionaire would troll around community centers and small non-profits to single out the most deserving of the do-gooders. By night, she or he would have to live in a run-down apartment and try to survive off of public assistance benefits.

Each episode ended with the same big finish: the millionaires would reveal their true identities and make significant donations to a handful of charities of their choosing. Each millionaire was required to give a total of \$100,000 of his or her personal fortune.

If you could look past the theatrics of millionaires shedding tears while trying to slum it and, then, shedding more tears when whipping out their salvific checkbooks, you were able to catch a glimpse of something extraordinary. The show went where few reality shows have gone before: it offered a brief look into the work of little-known, unsung heroes who devote themselves to transforming the lives of the poor, the sick, and the lonely.

Many of these heroes worked among the homeless and the mentally ill. Yet there were no rock-bottom addicts to exploit or obsessive compulsives gape at in horror. It was, to my knowledge, one of the few instances where reality TV gave the viewing public what they are most deprived of: ordinary, holy people who are worthy of attention and admiration.

Our imaginations are not naturally geared toward seeing holiness in regular, unknown folks. But, the truth is, anyone who graces the lives of others through love, compassion, sacrifice and mercy should be seen as blessed. It is precisely these kind of spiritual heroes that we need to inspire us so that we, too, can become instruments of transformation.

If all of the conflict over John Paul II's beatification makes anything clear, it's that the concept of sainthood still fascinates us. But what seems to be overlooked amid all of the jubilation and consternation is the depth of our hunger to seek and find human beings in whom we can truly believe.

Those whose service teaches us unconditional compassion and whose integrity offers us a moral witness that we can authentically trust. Those quiet, anonymous heroes and saints who work among us as true channels of God's grace and love are very often all we need.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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