

Models of “Being Holy”

— A View toward the Past, the Present, and the Future —

Deep in the heart of every Christian lies the desire to be holy. It is part of our “job description,” so to speak; in baptism, we pledge to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rm 13:14).

A few years ago I took part in my first canonization, in which John Gabriel Perboyre was declared a saint. The celebration, I must say, touched me far beyond what I had anticipated. Since then, I have found myself reflecting often on models of holiness. I remember reading, as a boy, the lives of Isaac Jogues and Jean de Brébeuf. They moved me deeply. I had many a fantasy about paddling my canoe to the remotest reaches of Canada and shedding my blood for the sake of the gospel! I also recall devouring a poignant biography of Damien the Leper. I was forcefully struck by his life and death and by the stirring letter that Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in his defense. I imagined myself ministering to the most abandoned, though I surely found wasting away with leprosy much less attractive than a swift martyr’s death!

For Catholics in all ages the saints have made holiness real. They give it flesh. They show us in the concrete what it means to live the gospel. Even in our most anti-institutional moments or in cultures where events like canonizations evoke less than an enthusiastic response, there is something deep within us that yearns for holiness. We want the charity of Christ to fill us. That is, after all, what it means to be a Christian.

Four Models

From the lives of the saints, our tradition has distilled certain models. Models are concrete images. They are not metaphors like the classical “following of Christ,” “climbing the ladder of perfection,” or “ascending the spiritual mountain”; rather they give a clear, brief (even if incomplete) insight into the concrete reality of holiness and make us aware of what commitment to it involves. They are like “icons” of the gospel, symbols of Christian self-giving.

Models do not exhaust the reality; they are partial representations of it. They complement rather than exclude each other, as each places a particular emphasis on what it means to be holy. As symbols, they also arouse an affective response within us, drawing us toward the goal of holiness. Who could fail to be moved, even while horrified, in reading how Brébeuf’s captors ate his heart in the hope of absorbing the courage they had seen him display!

Below, I will describe a few of these models, with the hope that they will be helpful to all of us in seeing where we might fit.

1. **Martyr**

The Christian community has offered this model to believers right from the beginning, presenting it to us dramatically in the gospels. Jesus “lays down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). All four evangelists build their narratives toward the climatic story of Jesus’ passion and death, followed by the triumph of his resurrection.

Jesus’ dying love has been the source of strength for countless martyrs since his time. Even the telling of martyrs’ stories has often been influenced by the passion accounts of the gospel. This is quite evident in the narration of Stephen’s martyrdom in the Book of the Acts, with its many similarities to the death of Jesus. John Gabriel Perboyre gave his life in a manner strikingly similar to Christ’s death. He was betrayed by a disciple, suffered a long passion, forgave his enemies, and died on a cross. As the story of his heroic death was recounted again and again, it took on more and more of the details of Jesus’ passion.

The wonderful part about this first model is its striking clarity and simplicity. It is wonderfully inspiring, arousing our admiration and our deep-seated desire to give generously. The martyr, out of love, renounces the most basic of all human gifts, life. Some saints, like Polycarp, underwent a martyrdom which crowned a long life that was already strikingly holy. “I have served Christ for 86 years,” Polycarp told his captors, “how could I deny my king and savior now?” For others, martyrdom was more like a “second baptism,” washing away their (even rather notable) sins “in the blood of the lamb.” One 16th century martyr, for example, was living in concubinage at the time of his death. That paled into insignificance, however, in the light of his martyrdom; he was canonized anyway (something that might strike us as rather odd!). In that sense, his martyrdom was perceived as an “express ticket” to the Kingdom of God.

In recent times, theologians like Karl Rahner have often recommended that the concept of martyrdom be broadened. Traditionally martyrdom has been defined as acceptance of death “for the faith.” In the case of Maria Goretti’s canonization in 1950, “faith” also included Christian morals. Moreover, in 1982 the Church recognized Maximilian Kolbe as a martyr in giving his life in substitution for another. One might hope for a similar broadening of the concept in the case of Oscar Romero, widely recognized as a martyr but not yet canonized, who gave his life by standing in solidarity with the poor in their struggle for justice. This might be said of many others in Latin America, like Rutilio Grande.

But as a model, martyrdom has some disadvantages. Martyrs are relatively rare. Few of us will walk that path. While we might long for the clear, simple, dramatic gesture, the truth is that, for most of us, the following of Christ will involve bearing the cross day-in and day-out, over a long life, with patience and fidelity. As a wise old missionary once said to me, “It is often harder to live for Christ than to die for him.”

The martyr-model can also breed an occasional fanatic. We see kamikaze terrorists today who give their lives willingly, while killing others, convinced that this guarantees their immediate entrance into God’s presence. I once knew a fiery prelate of whom a friend of mine said, with some frustration: “He was born to be a martyr. He is ready to die for any cause and fights with equally fierce tenacity whether the issue is great or small.” So far, he is still alive!

2. **Ascetic**

As the early persecutions came to an end and Christians became conscious that relatively few were winning the crown of martyrdom, they began to focus more sharply on another model: the ascetic. “Asceticism” means training or discipline. Christ’s “athlete” seeks the laurel wreath placed on the head of the winner at the end of life’s race. “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. From now on a merited crown awaits me” (2 Tim 4:7). The ascetic often engages in fasting, sexual abstinence, and an austere or simple lifestyle. The point of such ascetical practices, at least in their best form, is not to “give up” objects, but to reconstruct the self, to become a new person. In other words, all self-denial has growth in love as its goal.

Over the centuries virginity and celibacy have stood near the top of the ascetical ladder. This reflects how highly the Christian community has esteemed the sacrifice involved in renouncing sexual intimacy. But of course, the quest for holiness does not end with such renunciation. The same energy that a person might have poured into the pursuit of marital fidelity, or possessions, or power is meant to be expended in the service of the Lord and his Kingdom.

The ascetical model has many advantages. It has given birth to numerous saints because it has enabled them to concentrate their energies on the affairs of the Lord. In fact, the following of Christ always involves discipline, “taking up one’s cross daily” (Lk 9:23). On the list of ascetics and great lovers of the cross, one thinks spontaneously of Francis of Assisi whose life has fascinated countless Christians. He lived with wonderful simplicity, renouncing family, wealth, marriage, and power, while still obviously being deeply in love with creation.

The witness of a simple lifestyle, of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, of humble and obedient responsiveness to the needs of the poor is a powerful sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God. An ascetic model, while not very

much in vogue today, has enormous relevance in a consumer society characterized by the inequitable distribution of wealth, an entertainment culture, the desire for immediate gratification, and exploitative sexual and power relationships.

On the debit side, ascetics have always run the risk of Pelagianism, an athletic view of salvation. The tendency is to think that if one “trains” well enough, the race is won. Ascetics can become proud of their “works.” They can become hard on others who seem less disciplined. But ultimately, holiness is a gift from God, not an ascetical achievement. Only the humble are able to receive it.

3. **Contemplative**

Jesus’ prayer is striking in the gospels. Christians have always been fascinated by his union with God, whom he called his Father. From very early times, some went off into the desert to pray, as Jesus did. Gradually, communities became organized and, with time, a whole monastic tradition developed, with St. Benedict laying the ground rules.

Contemplation is, of course, not limited to monks, as Thomas Merton often pointed out. I think immediately of Blessed Anna Maria Taigi, a housewife who lived in 19th century Rome, famous for her works among the poor and her contemplative union with God, all of which she carried out while raising seven children of her own and taking care of the six children of her widowed daughter. I recall, likewise, Madame Acarie, mother of six, to whom all the great spiritual leaders in France at the beginning of the 17th century came for advice about union with God; her children laughed with her, in her later years, as they reminisced about how they had to wait for her to come out of her mystical ecstasies.

The serious pursuit of holiness, in whatever form it might take, has consistently recognized the need for union with God in some form of prayer. In the monastic tradition, however, life’s contemplative dimension stands out in stark relief. One withdraws from society in order to hear the deepest voices of reality: the word of God and the cries of suffering humanity.

The contemplative model has some wonderful advantages. It places before us with great clarity one of the indispensable elements of New Testament spirituality: union with God in Christ. The contemplative dedicates his or her life to meditating on God’s word, to singing his praises, and, at times, to a “wordless” kind of union that is often described as “contemplative prayer.”

The dangers of this model are “escapism” and “angelism.” The contemplative’s withdrawal from the world, as Thomas Merton reminded his

readers, must enable him or her to hear life's deepest voices. If one simply flees, one remains rapt in splendid isolation. Moreover, the contemplative must be ever mindful of the concreteness of life. We express ourselves bodily, not as angels. Real Christian love must body-forth in concrete acts. One is surely suspect who has beautiful contemplative moments but is difficult to live with and relate to.

4. **Servant**

Outgoing charity is the core of the following of Christ. "By this shall all know that you are my disciples: that you love one another" (Jn 13:35). The other day I met two recently retired Italian women, both nurses. I asked them how they were enjoying their new leisure. They told me that it was wonderful. They finally have time to relax. Each — as they told me — has obtained, through Catholic Charities, a list of sick people to whom she ministers, visiting them in their homes. I was struck by how spontaneously they had focused on an essential aspect of the gospels at this autumn time in their lives: serving those in need. There have been millions of individuals like them, not to mention the many communities founded specifically for that purpose. Saints like Vincent de Paul, communities like the Daughters of Charity, and the countless lay groups that reach out to touch the needy are a striking sign in the world of the good news of God's presence.

A significant advantage of this model is that it can be lived out in very varied circumstances. Missionaries, spouses, teachers, lawyers, doctors, nurses, can all build their lives on the gospel foundation of a call to service. This is especially true because gospel service need not be dramatic but can be as simple as "giving a cup of cold water" (Mt 10:42) to the thirsty. From the prominent politician who regards himself as a "public servant," to the obscure poor person who finds ways of serving others who are even poorer, all can identify in some way with the servant role.

The danger of this model is, of course, activism. If the contemplative might attempt to live as an angel, the servant might try to be a messiah, shouldering all the world's problems. If the former does too little, the latter attempts too much, burning himself or herself out and winding up disillusioned or bitter.

These four models give all of us plenty to work on. The martyr tells us that some things are worth dying for, foremost among these being our faith in Christ. The ascetic reminds us of the cost of discipleship: there is no following of Christ without denying oneself and taking up the cross daily. The contemplative accents the transcendent, calling us to union with God in prayer. The servant teaches us that practical, everyday charity lies at the heart of New

Testament spirituality and is the only really convincing sign that one loves God and one's neighbor.

A fifth model?

The models complement one another. Most, if not all, saints whose lives epitomize the servant model were also deeply prayerful. The contemporaries of Vincent de Paul, surely one of the most active saints of charity, recognized him as a contemplative. His followers in fact, are called to be "contemplatives in action and apostles in prayer." Likewise, many ascetics have been generous servants (one need only think of the Curé of Ars) and many contemplatives have been formidable ascetics (like Anthony in the desert). Martyrs, of course, have also offered striking examples of all the other models.

But while each of the models can be an effective springboard to holiness, especially when complemented by the other models, they all have a somewhat "privatizing" ring about them. In an age where we emphasize the role of the community in the quest for holiness (we are baptized into *the Church*; we celebrate the liturgy *as a community*), the four models speak very much of the individual. One could, of course, supplement the models by adding additional considerations about how important the support of others is to the martyr, the ascetic, the contemplative, and the servant. But the models themselves do not clearly carry that connotation with them. In that sense, they leave something to be desired.

May I suggest another model which, to be truthful, you will not find on the classical list distilled from the Christian tradition, but which I would love to see added in the future. For debating purposes, let me call it "the couple." I choose the name "the couple," because married persons, we believe, enter into a covenant to work out their holiness *together*. They are to love one another as Christ loved the Church, with a love that is sacrificial, forgiving, service-oriented, and faithful unto death.

Actually, over the centuries, there have been many husband and wife saints. They have come from all strata of society. At the head of the list stand Mary and Joseph, who came from the surroundings of a wood-worker's shop. Priscilla and Aquila, both regarded as saints, earned their living as tent-makers. Justinian (482-565) and Theodora, saints in the Orthodox tradition, were emperor and empress. St. Stephen and Blessed Gisela (11th century) were the first king and queen of Hungary. Isidore of Madrid and María de la Cabeza (12th century) were farmers.

Of course, I recognize that, ironically, some spouses become saints *in spite of* their husband or wife, or precisely *because of the difficulties* created by

their partner, but that is by no means the Christian ideal. The ideal is that they walk the Christian journey together.

The couple model has two striking advantages. First, it has wide applicability. Most people get married. Committed married life is the ordinary way in which most Christians grow holy or fail to do so. Would it not be wonderful to hold up before today's Christian community a number of striking examples of modern married saints, *both* of whom were canonized. These saints would surely have profited from the other models (since, as mentioned above, all the models are complementary), learning self-giving from the martyr, self-denial from the ascetic, prayer from the contemplative, and action from the servant. But the couple's pilgrimage, and learning, would be a common project.

This brings me to the second advantage of the model. It is communal, social. The couple pledges to mirror the union of Christ and his Church, to work out their holiness *together*. This communal dimension of the model corresponds to the reality of the following of Christ, which always takes place in company with others.

On the debit side, one might object that the couple-model underrates the individual responsibility which the human person can ultimately never shirk and which is the precise reception-place for God's gift of holiness. That is surely a valid caution. Nonetheless, I sense that it is precisely the opposite side of the coin that needs more emphasis today: namely, that marriage is a covenant of holiness which husbands and wives enter into *together*.

Will the third millennium bring us canonizations of "saintly couples"? I hope so.