

MISSIONARY SAINTS AND MARTYRS

Models of Living Faith

Catholics are very familiar with a wide variety of saints, holy people who, throughout the centuries, have been living witnesses of their Christian faith. Individuals are often named after a particular saint; their parish or even their town may bear a saint's name. They probably heard about various saints from their grandmothers, mothers, or catechists. Indeed, saints come in a great variety of models: women and men, young and old, living in cities or in the countryside, married or single, priests, religious and lay. In addition, our Catholic faith teaches us that we belong to the "communion of saints" and that, as Scripture notes, we are surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1). Given this splendid diversity of lived holiness, how could one hope to define a saint?

A simple story can capture a true image of a saint. One day a little boy of five years accompanied his mother to the city. After they had finished their errands, they stopped into the cathedral church. It was a bright, sunny day and the church was awash in beautiful colors coming from the stained-glass windows. The mother explained to the boy that many of the figures in the windows were well-known saints. Later, when the boy was asked by his father what he saw in the church, the lad said that he saw many saints in the church's windows. The father pursued his questioning, asking "what is a saint?" The boy responded: "Saints are people through whom the light shines."

Yes, saints are ordinary human persons through whom God's light, love, and grace are seen. All of us as baptized Christians are to be instruments of God's grace; we are to let God's love be manifested in and through our lives. In this way, we fulfill our missionary calling to give witness to our faith. We can be inspired by the lives of the five "missionary saints" whose life story is briefly narrated here.

Francis Xavier (1505-1552), born of noble blood, was a student preparing for a career of wealth and status as a diocesan priest when he met Ignatius of Loyola. It took several years for the future founder of the Society of Jesus to win him over to the vision of a life of gospel poverty and mission, but once Francis made his decision, he became Ignatius' most trusted friend and collaborator among the first group of companions. When the nascent society was asked by the Pope to provide two men for mission in the Indies, it was with the greatest sorrow that Ignatius allowed Xavier to substitute for another who had become ill.

Departing in 1540, Xavier would never see the shores of Europe again. On his several subsequent sea and land journeys in service of his mission, he endured bad food and water, lengthy delays, pirate threats, the vagaries of unreliable captains, near disasters during storms, and other grueling hardships. His first trip, with a destination of Goa in India, took over two years.

Upon arrival in India, Xavier quickly set about the work of evangelization. After only a few months in Goa, he was asked to work among the Parava people on the Indian coast opposite Sri Lanka. Xavier devoted himself wholeheartedly to teaching and caring

for these low-caste fishermen, who were subject to much mistreatment by fellow Indians and Europeans alike. Even after he had moved to other missions in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan, Xavier had a special care for the Parava people and attempted—with little success—to protect them from the cruelty so frequently visited upon them.

Although he apparently was never able to become proficient in the languages of the peoples he served, Xavier made a policy of seeking to reach them in their own language rather than (like the earlier missionaries) requiring converts to learn Western language and culture. He would typically begin his evangelization by finding collaborators who would assist in translating the creed and basic prayers into the local language and then teaching these in sung form. Later on, he would sometimes have a local Christian preach while he stood by praying for the success of the effort. Despite his linguistic difficulties, Xavier was evidently a very charismatic communicator; in each of the localities where he worked, a strong indigenous Christian community became well established.

Xavier was indefatigable in his zeal to expand and enhance the effectiveness of his mission. In Japan, lack of success in his initial efforts led him to the innovative insight that communication required taking on not only the language of the local people, but their dress and comportment as well. After the authorities approved this breakthrough, he was able to covert several Japanese who, without ever learning a European language, carried out significant campaigns of gospel preaching. Meanwhile, discovering that the Asian people regarded China as the cultural capital of the world, Xavier became convinced that the full success of his mission of evangelizing the Orient required him to shift the focus of this attention there. It was not to be, however. After only twelve years on mission, but already a legend in both Europe and Asia, the forty-six-year-old Jesuit died on Sancian Island while on his way to China.

Thérèse of Lisieux was born Marie Françoise Thérèse Martin in Alençon, France on January 2, 1873. When she was fifteen years old and too young to enter the Carmelite Monastery, she pleaded her case before Pope Leo XIII; eventually permission was granted. Two of her sisters had preceded her in Carmel. Her exemplary parents Zélie and Louis Martin, the first couple ever canonized together in the history of the Church, were declared saints by Pope Francis on Mission Sunday, October 18, 2015. The final years of Thérèse's short life were spent within the cloister of an obscure convent. She died of tuberculosis on September 30, 1897, at the tender age of twenty-four.

Thérèse would have probably attracted little notice, except for her posthumously published autobiographical manuscript, *The Story of a Soul*. This work, written out of obedience to her superior, describes her experience and her deep insights into the spiritual life. Essentially, the work is about the path to holiness in everyday life. One spiritual writer suggested that a subtitle might have been: "The Making of a Saint."

Largely through the impact of that book, Thérèse was canonized on May 17, 1925, only twenty-eight years after her death. On December 14, 1927, Pope Pius XI proclaimed her the principal patroness, equal to Saint Francis Xavier, of all missionaries, men and women, and of all the missions in the whole world. More recently on World Mission Sunday

in 1997, Pope John Paul II named Thérèse a Doctor of the Church. She became the third woman in the Church to be so honored, joining Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, who were named Doctors of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1970.

Saint Thérèse did not found a religious order; she never performed great works and never went to the missions. However, she understood that what is important in the Christian life is great love and not great deeds. Thérèse, the saint of the “little way,” developed a spirituality of ordinariness, in which one offers each moment and every deed simply and lovingly to God. Her famous title, “the Little Flower,” derives from her self-image as only one among millions of ordinary, little flowers on the hillside, each giving its all in joy and praise to God. Thérèse is a source of deep hope to millions who desire to serve God their loving Father through their littleness, simplicity, and love. They find in Thérèse their own vocation and spirituality, their “doable” and “livable” pathway of daily sanctification.

We listen to brief excerpts from Thérèse’s profound insights. “We can never have too much hope in God. He gives in the measure we ask.” “I love my littleness and my poverty; it is my blind hope in His mercy, this is my only treasure.” “Merit is not to be found in doing much or in giving much, but rather in receiving and in loving much.”

“I have always wanted to become a saint.... In spite of my littleness, I can aim at being a saint. It is impossible for me to grow bigger, so I put up with myself as I am, with all my countless faults. But I will look for some means of going to heaven by a little way which is very short and very straight, a little way that is quite new.... It is your arms, Jesus, which are the lift to carry me to heaven. And so, there is no need for me to grow up. In fact, just the opposite: I must stay little and become less and less.” Indeed, Thérèse’s little way is path for all of us desiring to be “saints of the ordinary.”

Damien of Molokai is well known for his missionary dedication and heroic service of the lepers in Hawaii. When he arrived in Molokai in 1873, he found the place in a state of abandonment; just about everything was lacking. Damien set about remedying the situation. He built houses, brought in a water supply, improved the port, enlarged the hospital, built a church and an orphanage, made coffins, encouraged gardening, opened a store where the sick could get supplies. He taught the people to farm, to raise animals, and even to play musical instruments. He labored with great zeal to raise the needed finances. It took years of hard work and dogged determination to provide for the physical and spiritual needs of his flock.

For the occasion of Damien’s canonization in 2009, his religious family published a letter which asserted that “Damien is a universal brother, model of humanity, apostle of the lepers, hero of charity, inspiration for every human being who feels called to serve the marginalized and forgotten, pride of the Belgian and Hawaiian peoples, glory of the entire Church.” In Damien one finds verified a simple verse of scripture: “The love of Christ compels us” (2 Cor 5:14). Pope Benedict XVI, during the canonization ceremony, said of Damien: “His missionary activity, which gave him such joy, reached its peak in charity.”

What is particularly striking about Damien (as verified by his letters) is the profound joy he experienced in providing hope for the people he served. In a November 9, 1887 letter to his brother Father Pamphile, he wrote: “The joy and contentment of heart that the Sacred Hearts deluge me with, make me consider myself the happiest missionary in the world.” He

continued: “Please help me with your good prayers to obtain persevering strength, till I happily arrive at the top of Calvary.” Less than a month before death, Damien remarked: “How happy I am to have given all... Now I die poor, having nothing of my own.”

Indeed, deep joy and profound happiness mark the life of this extraordinary missionary priest—even from his earliest days. In his final letter to his parents before Damien set sail to Hawaii (October 30, 1863), he wrote: “It is He [Jesus] Who in the midst of trials, contradictions, and sufferings, will cause us to enjoy a happiness of which he who has never experienced it can form no idea.” In another letter to his parents he wrote: “Do not worry about me in the least, for when one serves God, one is happy anywhere.”

“Impossible to express how immensely happy a missionary is,” Damien wrote to his parents after his arrival in Hawaii (March 22, 1864), “when he sees the new land that he must water with his sweat to gain civilized souls for God.” Writing to his parents and brothers from Molokai (November 25, 1873), Damien noted: “I find my greatest happiness in serving the Lord in his poor and sick children—who are rejected by others” [words inscribed on Damien’s tomb in the Louvain church crypt]. After six years in the leper settlement, Damien wrote on February 4, 1879 to his superior general in Paris: “I am still happy and content among my beloved lepers of Molokai.” When his death was approaching, Damien noted: “I die as a leper, but I am the happiest missionary in the world.”

Damien, the joyful evangelizer who lived “in joyful hope” with his leper community in Molokai, who calls himself the “happiest missionary in the world,” remains a contemporary witness of profound holiness, hope, joy, and authentic charity for the entire Church.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) was canonized on September 4, 2016. Father Brian Kolodiejchuk, MC served as the postulator, thoroughly investigating the documents and details of her life for over three years. Father Brian sees Mother Teresa’s life as unfolding in four phases: (1) Her Childhood and Youth, when she was captivated by the love of Jesus and discovered her call to become a nun; (2) The Vow of 1942, promising “To give God everything that He may ask ... not to refuse Him anything; (3) The Call within a Call on September 10, 1946 when she heard Jesus’ call to serve him radically in the poorest of the poor; and, (4) The Dark Night when she experienced feelings of doubt, loneliness, and abandonment.

After Mother Teresa left the Loreto Sisters and began the Missionaries of Charity, she experienced a profound union with Christ throughout 1946 and 1947. But, soon after beginning her work with the dying destitutes in the streets of Calcutta, she began to experience a spiritual darkness that remained with her until her death. Indeed, Father Kolodiejchuk’s investigations reveal that Mother Teresa’s life fit the model of the classic Christian mystic “whose inner life was burned through by the fire of charity, and whose fidelity was tested and purified by an intense trial of faith, a true dark night of the soul.”

The 2007 book of her letters, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, shows her struggling for decades. “If I ever become a saint,” she wrote in one letter, “I will surely be one of ‘darkness’.” This admission may upset some who suppose that following Christ automatically produces joy and tranquility—even a facile hope. Not true, religion costs; faith is not a warm security blanket. Faith and discipleship always lead to the foot of the cross.

What is remarkable is that, even in spite of darkness and suffering in her soul, Mother Teresa did not fall into self-pity or abandon her dedicated service of the poor and needy. She simply endured the darkness, never losing hope in her God or the unique call she had received. Indeed, knowing the immense challenges she endured, her faithful service becomes even more remarkable; she struggled to be a contemplative in the heart of the world, living her call in faith; she noted: “Many people mistake our work for our vocation; our vocation is the love of Jesus.” “The miracle is not that we do this work, but that we are happy to do it.”

The “revelations” about the interior life and the “dark night” of Mother Teresa have come as a hidden blessing to many people—religious, clergy, and laity alike. Why? They see themselves in her journey, often walking in darkness, struggling to believe and to have hope. Appreciating the struggles that she faced, people are drawn to imitate her example of heroic love. Mother Teresa’s hope and faith remained constant—even in the dark. Thus, her many insightful bits of advice acquire a new and deeper authenticity. They emerge from tried and tested faith; they are like gold refined in the fire.

Listen to some of her golden words: “To show great love for God and our neighbor we need not do great things. It is how much love we put in the doing that makes our offering something beautiful for God.” “I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.” “If you cannot feed a hundred people, then feed just one.” “Love is a fruit in season at all times, and within the reach of every hand.”

Maximilian Kolbe, with deep faith and courageous hope, endured the extreme horrors of Auschwitz, the notorious Nazi concentration camp in Poland. He proved that self-giving love and compassion can thrive even in extreme darkness and cruelty. His heroic life inspired other prisoners, giving them hope that kindness and self-sacrifice were possible—even in Auschwitz. This “factory of death” functioned from 1940 until 1945; studies demonstrate that between 1.1 and 1.5 million people perished there.

Maximilian’s final act of Christian service came on July 30, 1941. Auschwitz had the rule that if anyone escaped from a cell-block, ten men would be consigned to an underground bunker and starved to death. One man from Kolbe’s Cell-block 14A went missing (later it was discovered that he drowned in a latrine). The commandant selected ten men to die. One of them, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out: “My poor wife and children! I will never see them again.” Father Kolbe volunteered to take his place. The commandant asked who he was. Kolbe replied: “I am a Catholic priest.” Kolbe’s offer was accepted.

All ten were thrown into the starvation bunker. To console them and ease their suffering, Kolbe led songs and prayers each day. After two weeks four remained alive. Needing the cell for more victims, the four were put to death by an injection of carbolic acid on August 14, 1941. Survivors of Auschwitz tell of Kolbe’s patience in suffering, his forgiving attitude, and the simple hope that he brought to those enduring these brutal acts.

Franciszek Gajowniczek survived and returned to his wife; he lived to be 95 years old, though his children had perished during the war. Pope John Paul II canonized Kolbe on October 10, 1982 in Saint Peter’s Square before a vast assembly. Along with other Auschwitz survivors, Franciszek Gajowniczek, wearing his striped prison uniform, was present at the moving ceremony (as was this writer who was in Rome for studies).

Today, when one visits the Auschwitz concentration camp and goes to the underground starvation bunker, one sees the paschal candle prominently displayed in the middle of the cell. What a moving sight! The candle, symbol of Christ's own death and resurrection, touches the core of Christian faith—your faith, my faith, the faith of Father Kolbe. To pray (as did this writer in 2007) at the very site of the death chamber of Cell 18 where Kolbe manifested such profound self-giving inspires deep hope. The “Saint of Auschwitz” is a true martyr of heroic charity; he genuinely lived the Gospel: “A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13).

The Polish bishops have written: “The life and death of this one man alone can be proof and witness of the fact that the love of God can overcome the greatest hatred, the greatest injustice, even death itself.” Jerzy Bielecki, a camp survivor, noted that Father Kolbe “was like a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp.”

As already noted, the scene at the Auschwitz concentration camp places the paschal candle at the heart of life—with all its ugliness and yet with all its heroic Christian witness. A disciple places the crucified-risen Jesus at the center of life—with all its joys and sorrows, its anxieties and hopes. Be a “paschal candle,” radiating the light of the risen Christ to all. Serve the poor, the needy, and those in distress, giving without counting the cost.

Reflection Questions: Examine the life of *each* of these five missionary saints and then ask yourself: What characteristic in their life is *most inspiring* to me? What quotes from these saints do you find most revealing of a true Christian's life? Ask yourself: How will I allow God's love to shine through me so as to inspire and serve others?

[J. Kroeger]