

SAINTS FOR TODAY

By SARA MAITLAND

BEFORE I CAN HOPE TO ANSWER the question about who are the saints of today, and who should be the saints of tomorrow, I need to ask a more fundamental question: what are saints for?

But this is not a proper question. We have a dangerous tendency towards a sort of theological functionalism – that everything has to be *for* something (in the case of saints – to praise God, to represent the Church Triumphant, to intercede for me, to edify the Christian community and so on and so forth). But it is not clear to me that God works in this way; perhaps God does not create for any particular purpose other than delight and curiosity. Perhaps saints are not for anything.

Perhaps I should ask rather – what do saints *do*? or better still who *are* saints? What is holiness? The task is not just to say what sort of saints would I find useful, and then nominate some, but a more profound and meditative act of discernment. Is this person a saint? Does their being enable and empower my holiness? Yours? Ours as a community? The saints will *be* saints, will be enjoying the fullness of their humanity and the sweetness of the presence of God, whether or not we recognize it; we will be the losers, not they, if we do not.

So, before I talk about *who*, I would like to look briefly at the underlying question: what is holiness? What is it, rather than what is it for. What the saints are, I think, is people in a particular condition of life, like a job. The underlying qualification for the job, however, is holiness.¹

Holiness is a complex concept. In particular it involves two almost contradictory strands – something (someone) holy is something that has been ‘set apart’, but also and simultaneously something that channels the transcendent back into the mundane. It is in this sense a liminal state and therefore necessarily hard to categorize. It seems to me helpful to some extent to recognize that the word ‘holy’ derives from the same root as the words ‘whole’ and ‘health’. When such a concept is applied to persons (as opposed to buildings, costumes or vessels, for example) there is an immediate conflict between contemporary ideas of psychological integrity and Christian ideals of self-denial. It is easier then to reduce the concept of the holy from the mysterious to the ethical, and make it refer solely to moral goodness,

usefulness, lovability, than to address the inevitable destabilization of psychological well-being involved in the decentralized location of the liminal.

But the liminal is a key value here. A holy person, in Christian terms, has to have an 'owned self', an autonomy, a rigorous ego, in order to give it away. Holiness has been described to me as 'a person with a strong enough sense of their own ego to be able to make themselves available to others without loss'. The process of the annihilation of self requires a self to annihilate. Or, in contemporary terms, a saint has to be a bit crazy.

Living on the margins, in the gateways, is profoundly perilous. It is living at risk, consciously putting the self at risk. It is therefore both a courageous and a foolish way of being. Clearly Christians who do not believe in the death of the self, those with the strongest sense of the immortality of the person, are most likely to be able to live there with grace, to continue to be able to 'feed back' the transcendent. Holiness is considerably easier for those who have some criteria for self-authorization.

In their introduction to the ground-breaking book *Women of spirit*,² McLaughlin and Ruether suggest a particular quality necessary for this kind of holiness, something that they call 'radical obedience'. Talking about this in relation to Christian women they say:

Orthodox theology is appropriated by such women with a radicality and depth of insight that transforms it into an expression of the full personhood of women . . . such loyal dissent typically takes its stand on a vision of the 'true meaning' of the Gospel . . . that at the same time rejects its patriarchal deformations.

The holy person has to say to the world of their own historical moment, as the novelist Ursula le Guin has a character of hers say, 'But it is time you recalled that, though I am a servant, I am not your servant'.³

This perilous balancing act, by which an owned self can secure itself by radical obedience to a God who authorizes as well as possesses, seems to me to lie at the heart of holiness. But although holiness is an interior state, it is not one without social consequences, which may enable others to recognize the condition. There is a very simple test of the genuine achievement of this poise: does this person manifest two of the fruits of the Spirit – courage and joy? Holiness must manifest itself in a growing freedom, and increasing sense of adventure.

The heroes of classic adventure stories are courageous, outrageous, laconic, restless and free-spirited. Most of all they seem to want to

know what will happen next. What does happen is usually horrendous – dragons, deserts, loneliness, monsters, poverty, humiliations, crucifixions – but this does not seem to deter them. On the contrary, though they are frequently stunned by ill fortune or their own foolhardiness, as soon as they are conscious again they are up and looking for another adventure.

Recently feminist critics have alerted us to the serious moral problems in the ethos of the noble hero. Bits of these stories about lonely heroes, usually male, who travel out into the big bad world to 'defeat' the forces of darkness and receive upper-class virgins as their natural reward are not really stories about risk and solidarity at all. They are self-rewarding tales which give a certain bogus glamour to the wholesale destruction of whatever the hero's particular culture sees as uncivilized. But underneath all this there can be a true sense of joyful adventure, which I am suggesting is the mark of holiness. For anyone who loves their life will lose it, but anyone who will throw it away, chuck it and chance it, will gain and keep it. I am not here suggesting that adventuring is a virtue, but that it is a consequence of holiness, a consequence so nearly inevitable that it can be used as a litmus paper to check out the authenticity of the proposed saint.

I have here proposed a tentative definition of holiness as an abstract and individualistic phenomenon. In fact, however, holiness is not a gold star award for excellence; it is the possession of the whole people of God. Holy lives are not lived abstractly, but firmly within history, and they are not lived alone but within community. (I have argued elsewhere⁴ my conviction that to be a person – to have a self to give away – is to be an individual in community: 'we are engaged in constructing each other's humanity'.)⁵ In this sense then we can in fact ask the original question: 'What are saints for?' Which sorts of selves might best encourage us to go adventuring, to risk destabilizing our own selves?

When I speak of a self as being created in community I do not just mean in a contemporary sense. History, lives already lived, is part of the constructive community that creates our present selves. Or as Rowan Williams has put it:

The self at any given moment is a made self – it is not a solid independent machine for deciding and acting efficiently or rationally in response to stimuli, but is itself a process, fluid and elusive, whose present range of possible responses is part of a developing story. The self is – one might say – what the past is doing now.⁶

In this sense, as feminists have learned, self-knowledge and the ability to act out of an owned self requires a sense of one's own history. There is no identity without history. Sheila Rowbottom, a feminist historian, explains her own endeavour:

The writing of our history is not just an individual venture but a continuing social communication. Our history strengthens us in the present by connecting us with the lives of countless women. Threads and strands of long lost experience weave into the present. In rediscovering the dimensions of female experience lost in the tangled half-memories of myth and dream, we are uncovering and articulating a cultural sense of what it means to be a woman . . . we are heaving ourselves into history, clumsy with the newness of creation, stubborn and persistent in the pursuit of our lost selves, fortunate to be living in such transforming times.⁷

We cannot be radically obedient owned selves, we cannot be holy, until we have learned to see and understand a history of holiness, and to see it in relation to the political and social realities of its different times. The incarnation itself, the scandal of particularity,⁸ holds up specificity and difference as desirable. The particular acts that spring from holiness and may lead to sainthood are bound to be different at different times and in different places. More: in order to understand and examine such holy lives we also need an understanding of the history of representation, of the writing about the saints, of hagiography. Within a European and patriarchal tradition the representation of the marginalized has particular difficulties:

The chief problem in charting any history of women is the recovery and use of sources. The marginality of women in the Jewish and Christian religious traditions means that few sources exist for judging their roles. Those that can be found were generally recorded by males . . . material about women that does not fit these prescriptions is likely to be edited out if the woman is to be held up as a 'good' model, or turned into a polemic if the woman is regarded as a 'bad example'.⁹

Since this sort of bias is rarely conscious it is worth remembering that everyone has such biases – and that includes, for instance, feminists. A twentieth-century feminist hagiographer will be as guilty of bias as the most sexist Father of the Church – the two differences being that she ought to know it and take care, and that his versions are more likely to carry authority and influence than hers at the centre of power.

Now we can perhaps look at the saints that the Church recognizes and see if it is a group that can represent holiness for us. This should be a process more like deciding which pub or club to join when you want to make new friends than like an over-enthusiastic spring cleaning of heaven with a view to sending large amounts of lumber to the jumble sale. There cannot possibly be too many saints.

The question is not really who gets canonized, but who does not. If you thumb through any dictionary of saints you cannot fail to notice that your chances of canonization are radically increased if you are upper class: ideally from a minor royal household. In addition, there is a remarkable number of women virgins, for instance, and a rather surprising shortage of parish priests.

Now some of this is because the official categorization of saints is rather restrictive: there is very little doubt that Joan of Arc, for example, was indeed a virgin – at her trial the prosecution made considerable efforts to find out if this was not the case, and were totally unsuccessful – but it is not for her virginity that she is loved. However she was not a queen, nor a doctor (a theologian), nor a member of a religious order. Being a woman she could not be a priest or bishop. The Church could not possibly declare her a martyr since it had led her prosecution, found her a heretic and condemned her to death. So she just has to be a virgin because there are no other categories. Equally Radegund – Deacon of the Church, mother foundress of the Convent of the Holy Cross at Poitiers, academic and patron of the arts, key ambassador and peace broker in northern Europe, and owner of a piece of the true cross (a personal gift of gratitude from the pope himself) – is listed as queen, despite the fact that what she is famous for is precisely leaving her brutish husband King Clothaire of the Franks after less than eight years of marriage. Since she was patently not a virgin (one of her complaints against her spouse was that he raped her repeatedly) she would have to be a queen, because there was nowhere else to put her.

But it is not simply a categorization failure that has led, for example, to this fondness for virginity – it is culture, in this case an obsession with female purity. Virginity is at best a peculiar virtue: it can be taken away from someone without their consent; the failure to maintain it cannot be repented of (you cannot have virginity restored no matter how penitent you may be); and you cannot grow in its grace nor ask it of God if you do not have it. Now clearly virginity, as the possession of an owned self who has located their obedience beyond the boundaries of female submission, has had different meanings at different times.

Peter Brown¹⁰ has suggested that the stress on virginity in late antiquity was a radical anti-state posture. In the absence of contraception the refusal by women to have sex was a refusal to act as 'good citizens' in an Empire with a falling population: far from being a dualist anti-body stance it was in fact a prophetic, eschatological and political act.

The I've-taken-a-vow-so-I-can't-get-married virgins so immensely popular in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were women who were using their virginity to create a form of autonomy. The marriage resisters proclaimed, and were clearly seen to proclaim, the sacramental freedom of marriage over against the rights of fathers, independence of choice over chattel status. Virginity was also treated, at various times, as a way for women to claim spiritual equality with men; a way of evading parental control; and a difficult but necessary physical sacrifice in order to make time for other more interesting activities.

Basically, however, the situation has changed: while virginity remains a perfectly legitimate and healthy personal choice, it really does not create radical new space or challenge any convention theologically. In a profound way lesbians occupy the challenging imaginative space that used to belong to virgins – and no one seems to be looking for lesbians to canonize.

However we do urgently need women saints with a slightly different angle on their own ownership of their bodies to balance out this long and historically understandable emphasis on virginity – and we are not getting them. In 1950 the Roman Catholic Church canonized Maria Goretti. None of what follows should stand against the bloody-minded courage of a young woman who chose her own way over male definitions of her worth, but Maria Goretti was canonized because at the age of twelve she preferred death to the loss of her 'honour' – read technical virginity – at the hands of a rapist. She had taken a private vow of virginity before she reached the age of moral consent and believed that her Beloved would rather have her stabbed repeatedly than de-flowered. Her entry in the *Oxford dictionary of saints* concludes: 'In canonising Maria Goretti the Roman Catholic Church also honours innumerable others who in similar circumstances preferred death to dishonour'. This is pretty bizarre: on this reading the Church also dishonours every woman who failed to persuade their rapist to kill them! Why should we be expected to 'love' a God who would rather see us dead than uphold our innocence?

We do not need to have our attention fixed on a rather morbid defensive honour: this aspect of choice has been represented forcibly

over many centuries. In retaliation I am planning to open a Cause for the canonization of Lady Godiva (who as well as riding naked through Coventry, was the first recorded person in Britain to own a rosary). For each time we honour a woman who prefers her chastity to her life we should also honour one who rides humbly into the city, stripping herself of dignity, of modesty, of the protection of social convention and of self-esteem, for the love of the poor and oppressed. For so did he in whose name she rides. Unfortunately she was not a virgin, a doctor, a martyr, a queen. She was just a woman who lived out charity at her own most vulnerable point: she gave her body to the poor, and that is not canonizable.

We need then a new set of typologies, a different kind of categorization, for looking for saints today; and I do mean different – it is not that I want to add more categories to the existing ones. The categories that follow I offer tentatively, and certainly not exclusively, but more as a move towards shifting from a functional model of holiness to an ontological one.

Lovers

I was going to write something about charity, but wanted to find a word that would unite the self-giving, self-exploring work of contemplation (Mary) with the struggle of justice against poverty, illness, ignorance or oppression (Martha). Both these come from the same source: a person with enough ego to have something to give away, whose sense of self as united with Other frees him or her to put themselves at risk. Simone Weil suggests that justice is a particular form of generalized love – it is acting towards those we do not know as though they were our personal beloved. Lovers pay attention to the beloved; they are courageous on behalf of the other; and they are filled with joy. The specific acts of love will necessarily vary – riding naked about Coventry today might be worse than irrelevant – but it is about giving away that which is precious. A person with no sense of self-esteem cannot lovingly give themselves away.

Many of the martyrs of the Church would fit into this category, but only if they loved life. Hagiography is littered with individuals who appear to have organized their whole lives around a greed for violence and death; but it is equally littered by individuals who pursued bold and joyous courses through life and met death merrily on their way to do something else; and littered too with high-principled people, whose understanding of the destruction of selfhood that comes about through not telling the truth caused them to look death straight in its mean eyes and find it preferable to capitulation. The distinction is worth making.

Makers (or artists, creators, theologians)

We have learned that we are dependent for meaning on interpreters, on representations, but by and large we have not trusted the 'makers' enough, nor recognized the inevitable generosity in good representation. This category would, of course, include many of the Doctors of the Church, but should also include scientists, architects, primary-school teachers, cooks, as well as painters, poets, film-makers. A canon with Georg Cantor and Piero della Francesca in it would be a lovely thing. (And if you are wanting to hold out for miracles, then what could be more miraculous than the *Madonna del Prato* or Cantor's Absolute?)¹¹ To make something new is to act like God and to live adventurously and riskily: it is a sign of holiness to make something that is both new and loving.

Icons

To be an icon is not to make a representation, but to consent to be one. This is beyond generosity in a sense, because it is not something that we can choose: myth-making is a communal act. But it is something that we badly need to redevelop at this point in history. Our intra-personal psychological understanding here at the end of the millennium is probably more densely complex and sophisticated than it has ever been, but we are paying for this with a curious mythopoeic impoverishment. One of the particular claims made for saints is that they have a continuing existence outside of, beyond, time; we, situated within history, need something of this transhistorical vision to unite us in our shared humanity. Under the influence of a particularly pernicious myth called scientism we are losing our ability to use a poetic mythological capacity.

For example, our idea of what is now called a 'role model' is being reduced to wanting someone or something 'just like me'. The Virgin Mary has been a victim of this process, I think. Her virginity is now experienced as an insult to our sexuality and her Assumption and Coronation as an added insult to the shame of our mortality. But myth does not work this way. In an extraordinary number of mythologies the guardian power of a woman in childbirth is a virgin. For the Greeks it was the goddess Artemis, and for medieval women it was Margaret of Antioch. She was the appropriate saint, not just because she was a virgin but because she had been swallowed by a dragon and had walked out free through its dark narrow throat and huge stretched mouth. It was difference, it was her iconic powers, that made her one of the most popular saints in northern Europe, not because anyone thought that she

would provide them with useful dragon-training hints, or be a valuable role model.

We need some saints today who are not 'just like us' – we want historically grounded people who have gone beyond their historicity and carry the meaning of dreams, imagination, other realities. To meet this need we are going to have to lay aside our deference to psycho-analytical reductionism. It is possible to demonstrate that Catherine of Siena was (perhaps) an anorexic, and even easier to conclude that Rose of Lima was seriously perverse in her masochistic relationship with her God.¹² But having said that, you have not said that this minimizes their lives – only that they were lived from an extraordinary location, lived with bizarre courage that makes our own tenderness towards our puny selves seem rather limited. There are psychological and metaphysical realities in which we all participate and we should be more courageous ourselves in consenting to them. Sanity is not a virtue: mystics, visionaries, fools, the strangeness of otherness, all carry illuminations and access points to the divine, just as much as good works do. This needs our attention.

I am not here offering specific names for these categories. I am only suggesting that between criticizing the saints of the past, avoiding the miraculous, and judging human success by Freudian criteria (and it is worth remembering that Freud actually felt that believing in God at all was a sign of neurosis), we are in danger of cutting ourselves off from our colleagues and friends in heaven, from the numinous riches of holiness. We need saints today because they are brave, generous, tough and delightful.

NOTES

¹ Awkwardly, there is another underlying qualification and that is being Catholic, or Orthodox. Other religions and, by and large, the Protestant denominations have neither a process of public discernment nor a theological desire to express holiness in this specific way. The manifest holiness of many Protestants does not allow me to shanghai their theology and make them saints because they would not want to be them. Equally problematic is the contemporary attempt to claim people who were not Christians as saints – one thinks for instance of Simone Weil, who deliberately and explicitly did not want to become a Christian. Is it a recognition or an insult to incorporate her into a body that she did not wish to be incorporated into? I am not sure how quite to address this issue; and for the purposes of this article have decided to discuss only Catholics.

² E. McLaughlin and R. Ruether (eds), *Women of spirit* (Simon and Schuster, 1979).

³ Ursula le Guin, *A wizard of Earthsea* (Gollancz, 1971), p 162.

⁴ For example, in S. Maitland, *A big-enough God* (Mowbray, 1995), chapter 2.

⁵ I have stolen this lovely quote from Rowan Williams, and I cannot source it.

⁶ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), p 39.

⁷ S. Rowbottom, *Dreams and dilemmas* (Virago, 1991). Rowbottom might well be appalled that I should take her words and apply them to the Christian community, but – without stealing them

from the socialist feminist discourse for which she generated them – their applicability is remarkable.

⁸ The theological tag for the fact that Jesus – the eternal Logos, that which was with the Father before all worlds and of whom it can properly be said ‘it was not when he was not’ – nonetheless became human not in some abstract sense, but bound as all humans are into a very particular set of circumstances: maleness, Jewishness, first-century-ness, carpenter’s-son-ness etc..

⁹ McLaughlin and Ruether, *op. cit.*, p 16.

¹⁰ Cf Peter Brown, *The body and society* (Faber, 1988).

¹¹ Cantor’s Absolute is the mathematical name for the largest possible size of infinity. Georg Cantor, at the end of the nineteenth century proved, *inter alia*, that infinities come in an infinite range of sizes, and that Absolute Infinity could only be known through mystical vision.

¹² And I should say that I would be more hesitant to let sensitive teenagers read F. W. Faber’s ecstatic description of her self-abuse in *The saints and servants of God* than I would to let them watch *Pulp fiction*.