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PUBLISHER’S NOTE: Clarence J. Enzler was the author of many Catholic books and booklets, including *My Other Self* (1957) and *Everyone’s Way of the Cross* (1970). His nine-part series of Lenten reflections, published under the title “Heroism and Holiness,” first appeared in the *Ave Maria* magazine in February, March, and April of 1963.

Lenten Reflections

Two: Holiness Lies in What We Are—Not What We Do

BY CLARENCE J. ENZLER

St. Joseph of Cupertino flew through the air with the greatest of ease.

St. Teresa of Avila was sometimes observed in mystical rapture and on occasion suspended bodily above the ground.

Evil spirits physically attacked St. John Vianney, the renowned Curé of Ars.

St. Catherine of Siena lived for years, her only food the Blessed Host.

Like “man bites dog” this, in the literature of the saints, is news, and spiritual writers of the past have made the most of it. But they did us, and we do ourselves, a disservice in dwelling too long and admiringly on these external by-products of sanctity.

The saints themselves, realizing that the grace to conceal a grace is no small blessing, applied to these incidents Our Lord’s own words, “Tell no man of this.”

St. Teresa, for example, forthrightly described her distaste at being a public spectacle. “I would very often resist, and exert all my strength, particularly when the rapture was coming on me in public. I did so, too, very often when I was alone, because I was afraid of delusions.”

On one occasion she felt a rapture and levitation coming on “when we were all together in choir, and I, on my knees, on the point of communicating. It was a very sore distress to me; for I thought it a most extraordinary thing, and was afraid it would occasion much talk; so I commanded the nuns—for it happened after I was Prioress—never to speak of it.”

One can sense in her words a kind of chagrin that the good Lord should so embarrass her—as though she felt, while submissive to His will, that this was, if not beneath the dignity of His majesty, surely no way to treat a lady. She goes on to say that the

Everyone’s Way of the Cross

Clarence Enzler’s perennially popular *Everyone’s Way of the Cross* was first published by Ave Maria Press in 1970 and has since gone on to sell over 3.6 million copies, in both a [regular](#) and a [large print](#) edition. Ideal for either private devotion or public Stations of the Cross, Enzler’s meditation booklet urges us to carry on Christ’s “unfinished business” and unite our will with His.

moment she felt “that Our Lord was about to repeat the act, and once, in particular, during a sermon—it was the feast of our house, some great ladies being present—I threw myself on the ground; then the nuns came around to hold me; but still the rapture was observed.”

“I made many supplications to Our Lord,” she confesses, “that He would be pleased to give me no more of these graces which were outwardly visible.”

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This Spanish mystic, a woman of profoundly practical judgment, felt deeply that to dwell on the preternatural in the lives of the saints was to emphasize the superficial at the cost of the essential.

We of the laity are especially prone to think of holiness in superficial, unrealistic terms. In particular we think of sanctity as *doing something*, rather than *being someone*. We stress what the saints accomplished, rather than what they were, which is a little like being content with looking at an orange rather than eating it.

We think in terms of canonization. The result is that we say to ourselves: So few are canonized; how can I be a saint? Or in terms of founding an order, ransoming captives, establishing dozens of schools or hospitals. All these are quite outside our realm of reasonable expectation; how can we be saints? Or, we think of nights spent in contemplation, of stigmata, violent mortifications, mystical experiences. If these are required for holiness, how can we be holy?

This is to attribute to God a niggardliness which, but for our ignorance, would be a most terrible insult. Surely the God of love could not love any of us so little as to deny us the opportunity to become heroic in holiness. Surely He wishes each of us to give back to Him the gift of love He first bestowed on us.

Most of us who are parents have had the sweet experience of having our small son or daughter ask for a dime or nickel a few days before Christmas. We know why the request is made; the child wants to buy Mommy or Daddy a gift. And when the bar of candy, package of gum, pair of shoelaces, or whatever is presented to us at Christmas we are as delighted by this token of love as by anything we receive, however costly. Can it be that God asks more of us than we ask of our little ones? Can it be that He loves us less, understands us less? Surely all that God asks is that we take the coin of His gifts and turn it into a token of love to give back to Him. And His scales, insensitive to size, measure *only* His love.

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Our misconceptions of the nature of holiness are responsible in no small degree for the prevalence of spiritual mediocrity. This is why so many of us accept almost as axiomatic the fallacy that “normal” persons should not aspire to sanctity; that to do so smacks of presumption, even borders on the immodest, like a political hack aspiring to the presidency of the United States.

Our attitude toward the saints is not too unlike the attitude of my generation, as boys, toward the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame. In our hero worship we conceived of them as supermen, so superior to the players on our local college teams that any comparison was, athletically speaking, sacrilegious. It took a long time for me, at least, to outgrow this childish fantasy. In fact, I had to see some of the members of that fabled backfield close up and in civilian clothes before I could settle for the truth that they were just a *little* better—and a *little* better coached—than other good football players of their era.

We fail to realize that the saints were like us and that what they became is not unattainable for us. Instead, we tend to think

of them as actors and actresses in a kind of play; as though they knew all the time what their future held; and so they could prepare to carry out their clearly defined roles. Act One—a special call from God. Act Two—mystical prayer, levitations, miracles, wholesale conversions. Act Three—the seventh mansion, spiritual marriage, and transforming union.

Actually the saints, generally speaking, were quite as much in the dark about their futures as we are about ours.

In other ways, too, they were like us. No basic occupation that we pursue today is without its patrons or exemplars among them. Too often we forget that St. Peter was a fisherman, St. Luke a doctor, St. Paul a tentmaker who paid his own way as a missionary. St. Camillus was a soldier, as were St. Ignatius, St. Sebastian, St. Joan and others. St. Ives was a lawyer, so was St. Thomas More. St. Wildred was a baker, St. Julian an innkeeper, St. Andronicus a barber, St. Isadore a farmer, St. Gerard a tailor, St. Margaret of Cortona was a seamstress, St. Notburga a kitchen maid. St. Camillus liked to gamble, but was probably not too good at it. St. Ignatius enjoyed dancing and billiards and was probably skilled at both. St. John Bosco was an acrobat and amateur magician.

Among the saints were kings and queens, servants and beggars, geniuses and dullards, teachers and students, octogenarians and children, virgins and mothers of families large and small.

Some lived lives distinguished by holiness almost from birth. Others were notorious sinners for much of their lives. No fault that any of us has was unknown to some of them. Camillus, again, had a terrible temper, one so bad that it, added to his gambling, kept him constantly in trouble for some years. Margaret of Cortona was seduced by a nobleman and lived with him out of wedlock for nine years. St. Catherine of Genoa, married to an unfaithful husband,

gave herself over for a time to somewhat riotous living. Among the saints are some who are capable of saying to the worst of our generation, “anything you can do, I could do better”—or perhaps “worse” is a more accurate term.

They *were* like us. We *can* be like them in the one thing that matters—love.

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It is in the inner life that holiness resides. For centuries, during the Middle Ages, the emphasis was on terrible physical austerity; severe fasting, bloody scourgings, hair shirts. The reaction against seeking holiness through extreme bodily chastisement owes much to such saints as Francis de Sales. In proposing a rule for the Visitation order he sought “less rigor for the body—more gentleness of heart.” He thought it unwise for the nuns to be “more intent on keeping their stomachs free from meat than their minds free from self-will.”

The correct order, for St. Francis, was first to form the inner man, and after this to “set the outer life right.” In his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, he wrote, “I could never agree with the method of those who begin the formation of man with the outer posture of the body, the clothes and the hair. I believe that one must begin within.”

In one of his spiritual conferences, he told a little story on himself. “When I was a young student,” he said, “I was seized with a fervor and a great longing to be saintly and perfect. I began by fancying that, in order to become so, I must twist my head on one side when I was saying my Breviary, because another student who really was a saint did so.” Then followed the wry observation: “This practice I continued steadily for some time, but without becoming any holier.”

While in our day the outer posture is no longer so heavily stressed, we do seem to be in some danger of substituting something

only a little less superficial. We are too preoccupied with *doing*, rather than with *being*.

“We flatter ourselves that we are doing what God desires of us,” writes Father Leen in *In the Likeness of Christ*, “if only we fling ourselves with earnestness and zeal into the accomplishment of the duties that the state of life we have embraced imposes on us.”

In so doing, we all too often make our goal the perfection of the work rather than the perfection of ourselves. What may have truly begun as a work for God ends as something perfected out of ambition, vainglory, of the desire for praise. “We persuade ourselves,” notes Father Leen, “that in carefully doing God’s work we are seeking God. In reality we may be, in a subtle manner, seeking ourselves.”

Somehow we find it terribly difficult to build our lives on the principle that God is not nearly so interested in what men do (excluding sin, of course) as in what they are. The pressures of modern society stress doing, getting ahead, making a name. These are the measuring rods of worldly success, and they have infiltrated the spiritual realm.

But St. Augustine said, “God seeks thee more than thy gifts.” And this is wholly logical, first, because the person is superior to the gift, and second, because what we give depends ultimately on who we are.

We might think that what God wanted of Thérèse was her *Autobiography*, which has influenced so many millions for good. But no, what He wanted of Thérèse was that she be the “Little Flower,” allowing Him to make of her whatever He wished. Her story is wonderful because she was.

Consider St. Paul, the greatest of all missionaries. Saul had to become Paul before Christ let him do anything at all. He took him aside and made him the person He wanted him to be: first, by striking him down on the road to Damascus; then, by sending him to Ananias; next by leading him into the desert for three years of preparation; then by

permitting him a fortnight in Jerusalem; finally by 10 more years of preparation at home in Tarsus.

Only when God had made Saul into Paul did He permit him to evangelize and preach and write. What Paul did grew out of what Paul was—and what Paul was was far greater than what Paul did.

And it is striking that God did not write a set of specifications for His greatest missionary such as man would have written. Man would have made him incomparably eloquent. But St. Paul refers to himself as “inexperienced in speaking,” “without any high pretensions to eloquence,” as preaching “not with an orator’s cleverness,” “full of anxious fear,” and “so diffident when he meets you face to face.”

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In the Acts we read that Paul preached in Troas one evening until midnight, and a young man named Eutychus sitting in an open window fell asleep and tumbled from the third story to the ground. He was killed. But Paul went down, bent over him, embraced him, and restored him to life—then went back upstairs, commemorated the Last Supper and went on speaking until dawn.

Had he been able to preach “with an orator’s cleverness,” St. Paul says, the result might have been that “the cross of Christ might be robbed of its force.” Instead God used “a foolish thing, our preaching, to save those who will believe.... So much wiser than men is God’s foolishness; so much stronger than men is God’s weakness” (I Cor. 1:17-25).

Action will come. One cannot love God deeply without expressing it in deeds. But our action must flow from the love that is in us. Otherwise we are in danger of substituting God’s tasks for God.

Let us *be* the *someone* God has
destined—then there will be no question but

that we will *do* all He has planned for us.

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