

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

The Rev'd John Drymon
Saint Paul's, Batesville
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+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of
the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Until the adoption by the Episcopal Church of
the Revised Common Lectionary a few years ago, the
first reading on All Saints Day, from the book of
Ecclesiasticus, began thusly: "Let us now praise
famous men." While the new lectionary has
unfortunately dropped the reading, I think it
appropriate to take the sentiments of
Ecclesiasticus as a great rule for what we ought to
do today.

That said, it is impossible to remember all the
saints by name, to succeed in praising all famous
men. There are too many of the named, famous,
canonized saints alone to praise them all, not to
mention all those saints who happen not to have
been formally canonized, or whose memories have

faded over the centuries. So, permit me to share just two stories of saints, a diptych of sorts, one ancient and one modern, to provide an entry point into the concept of saintliness.

The first is St. Clare of Assisi, who lived during the 13th Century. Most well known for being St. Francis' sister, Clare was very active in good works herself, most notably founding the Order of Poor Ladies, a female counterpart to the Order of Friars Minor (or Little Brothers) that her brother Francis had founded. Perhaps Clare's most shining moment came in the year 1244. Fredrick II, then Holy Roman Emperor, was at war with the pope, and had employed bands of Saracens to plunder churches and monasteries throughout the Italian countryside. The marauders had made it to Assisi, and while they were scaling the convent walls, Clare, though she was ill, had herself carried out to the gate holding the blessed Sacrament, a consecrated host, up in sight of the enemy. Prostrating herself

before it, she prayed aloud: "Does it please Thee, O God, to deliver into the hands of these beasts the defenseless children whom I have nourished with Thy love? I beseech Thee, good Lord, protect these whom now I am not able to protect." Whereupon she heard a voice like the voice of a little child saying, "I will have them always in my care." She prayed again, for the city, and again the voice came, reassuring her. She then turned to the trembling nuns and said, "Have no fear, little daughters; trust in Jesus." At this, a sudden terror seized their assailants and they fled in haste.

The second saint, though never formally canonized or entered into a church calendar, was the Rev'd Dr. George Hendric Houghton, who served as rector of New York City's Church of the Transfiguration—"the little church around the corner" as it was and still is known—from 1848,

when at the tender age of 28 he founded the church, until his death in 1896, forty-nine years later. He is best known for opening the church to actors and other theatre folk, who were reckoned an unseemly crowd in those days.

To my mind, though, Houghton's finest hour came in July 1863. President Lincoln had instituted the first military draft in American history to counteract a growing Confederate threat. A large group of outraged New Yorkers commenced a riot which held the City captive for nearly a week. For years, the Church of the Transfiguration had served as a stop on the underground railroad, and during the riot came to house a great many of the city's black population, who feared gang violence. The angry mob, caught up in the irrationality of their group mentality, decided that blacks were mostly to blame for the war and the draft. So they headed for the little church with the intent of murdering those who had sought refuge therein. The mob twice

thronged the gates of the churchyard, and policemen on duty warned Fr. Houghton that they could not insure their protection. With firm resolution, Fr. Houghton lifted the processional cross from its place in the church, walked out to face the rioters, held the cross before them, and shouted, "Stand back, you white devils; in the name of Christ, stand back!" With these courageous words, the mob dispersed, and those in the church remained safe until the end of the riots.

What both St. Clare and Fr. Houghton had in common is a word that has sadly fallen out of our vernacular. The word is *virtue*. We've come to think, since the Enlightenment, that ethics is primarily about making the right decision when posed with a moral problem by applying some moral calculus. Modern people think in terms of actions, good works and mistakes, rather than character or virtue. But what made St. Clare and Dr. Houghton and all those

famous men and women we see on the Church Kalendar saints, wasn't that they were smart enough to figure out how to do the right thing most of the time. Rather, they were instilled with virtue and filled with the Holy Spirit, such that it became less a matter of decision making and more a matter of living in a way that their prayer and practice and commitment to Christ had made second-nature. I doubt that St. Clare or Fr. Houghton sat down and tried to figure out what action would lead to the greatest happiness for the most people, as the utilitarians would, or whether standing up to the mob should be a universal law, as Kant would have it. No, it was a lifetime of commitment to prayer and service and sacrifice which imbued them with courage and respect for life and a sense of obligation to "the least of these." It was not just about doing good things, but about growing into good people, becoming saints.

And here is the hard part. We are all called to be saints. We have all been given the gift new life in Baptism, new life just as profound and miraculous as that which Jesus gave to Lazarus. The responsibility we are given thanks to that gift is that we should all become saints. I don't just mean in the broad sense; as you may know "saints" was a term used for all Christians in the early church, and indeed we all have the promise of the life of the world to come as described in this morning's reading from Revelation. In that sense, all baptized Christians are saints, but I mean to say something even bolder. We are all called to nurture in ourselves and in our fellow Christians the virtue which made many to be "famous men", to be not only "small 's' saints", but "capital 's' saints", whose lives of virtue point to Christ himself, by whom the love of the Father is made apparent, and through whom the power of the Holy

Spirit works wonders which are beyond our wildest imaginations.

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