

The Myth about Saints

I was recently asked by a dear friend if I ever had any feelings of animosity toward anyone anymore, the questioner seeming to presume that the rather disciplined spiritual life I seemed to lead placed me beyond all negative emotion. It is an understandable presumption, because those who walk with God carry about them a cloak of tranquility that suggests the absence of any conflict in their lives. It is, however, an erroneous presumption. I do have feelings of animosity. I also experience feelings of anger and hatred and lust and the entire gamut of emotions common to man. I also experience temptation. If I didn't, I wouldn't be human; I would be an angel singing Alleluia to the Lord in heaven. So why do people presume otherwise?

The answer to that question first requires the shattering of the myth which says that extremely spiritual persons are not subject to baser emotions or susceptible to temptation. This myth developed largely as a result of our conception about our saints as paradigms of holiness, presuming that they lived utterly sinless lives in perfect obedience to the will of God. While there is no doubt that the saints were extremely holy people, they too - by their own admission - stumbled on the odd occasion and fell. Or to put it bluntly, they also sinned.

My purpose in highlighting this fact is not to disparage the saints, or to detract from their holiness. I have the greatest respect for all the men and women who have been canonized. My purpose is to demystify our impression of them, so that we realize that the saints were not spiritual superheroes endowed with some "super powers" that permitted them to be holy. Consequently, we need to realize that saying we cannot emulate them because we are "merely human" in comparison is nothing more than a cop-out, a justification for spiritual laziness. The saints were human too, as human as we are and just as fallible. They were subject to the same temptations that we face, and confronted by the very same emotions. That they lived holy lives, pleasing to God is without question, but they did so, not because they had any special powers that we don't have. They did so because they had a profound love for God and were willing to do anything and everything to please him - without excuse or justification.

If we wish to be saints - something that we are all called to be - a deep love for God is a prime requisite. This love for God translates into obedience. Obedience results in increased grace. Increased grace results in an increased capacity to avoid sin. An increased avoidance of sin results in saintliness. Increased saintliness leads to perfection. Perfection is what we need to attain because it is what we are commanded to attain as Christians. Let me quote an exhortation from Jesus himself. He said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48)

The road to perfection isn't easy, but it is one that we have to travel on if we wish to be true Christians. When I first commenced my journey on this road I fell several times. Some were small falls as I tripped over something unexpected that came along my way. Others were graver, a result of slipping back into a rut that had been hollowed over 25 years [see The Return of the Prodigal]. Others were harder falls still as the devil set up traps so cleverly I didn't see them until I was falling headlong into them. But this was natural. I was like a baby learning how to walk and it was inevitable that I'd stumble from time to time - just like any other baby learning how to walk would stumble.

You will fall too, and several times at that, when you begin your journey toward perfection. There will be occasions when your spirit will be so bruised and ache so terribly by your falls, your soul will weep in despair and frustration. I offer you the encouragement the Holy Spirit offered me at such times: "It isn't important that you fall. What is important is that you rise again. Remember that God doesn't hold any of this against you. He knows how hard you are trying. Just pick yourself up and keep walking."

As you grow in holiness, however, you will get stronger, and though the path won't get any easier - if anything, it will get more difficult - you will find yourself better equipped to walk on it. You will also be more attuned to the voice of the Holy Spirit, who will steer you away from less obvious dangers, and help you resist or react differently to the feelings of animosity, anger, lust and the like that sweep upon you. You will also be better equipped with the Word of God to resist temptation.

Please be aware though, that you might still fall. It is a foolish traveler who presumes that months (or years) spent on the road makes him immune to accidents - or an occasional error in judgment. At such times the devil will pounce on you with myriad accusations. He will tell you that you are wasting your time trying to be good; that perfection is impossible to achieve. He will tell you that your pretence at holiness doesn't fool anybody; everybody can see what a hypocrite you are. He will tell you that you've run out of grace; God has given up on you. Don't waste your time listening to him.

Just pick yourself up and keep walking.

<http://hsiweb.org/index.php/articles/aneel-aranha/the-early-years/pit-stops/item/120-the-myth-about-saints>