

Branded

What are the ingredients of sainthood? What constitutes a saint? Naturally, we associate piety, purity, devotion, humility, and all the other great virtues with lives that have been fully consecrated to God. But I want to probe even more deeply into this topic that is the theme of today's great Feast of the Church.

Sainthood is not the province of the beautiful and perfect. If we happened to chance upon one, we would probably not be impressed with his or her appearance, attractiveness, aura of power, or any other marked difference from anyone else. We might even be disappointed: : "*This is a saint?*" we would ask incredulously. St. Paul recounted the contempt of his opponents concerning his own demeanor : "*For his letters,*" they say, "*are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.*" The author of Psalm 119, a man of marvelous piety, declared: *I am small and despised, yet do not I forget thy precepts* (vs. 141). In other lands, and other times, saints have been disfigured and scarred by the torments to which they have been subject. Paul spoke of these evidences of sainthood displayed upon his own body: *From henceforth let no man trouble me : for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus* (Galatians 6:17). The Greek word for *marks* is "stigma", literally meaning "a mark pricked in or branded upon the body" (from Thayer's *Lexicon*...). Thayer's further comments here are very interesting:

"According to ancient oriental usage, slaves and soldiers bore the name or stamp of their master or commander branded or pricked (cut) into their bodies to indicate what master or general they belonged to, and there were even some devotees who stamped themselves in this way with the token of their gods. [The marks *of the Lord Jesus* which] Paul says he bears branded on his body are the traces left there by the perils, hardships, imprisonments, scourgings, endured by him for the cause of Christ, and which mark him as Christ's faithful and approved votary, servant, and soldier" (p. 588).

The word *stigma* immediately brings to mind the idea of the "stigmata", those wounds signifying the crucifixion which have mystically appeared on the bodies of certain holy men and women throughout the years since New Testament times.

In a word, the saints are marked men and women. They bear the seal of God's ownership imprinted within, and sometimes even upon, themselves. Ultimately, this is a spiritual marking, of no significance to the world whatsoever, but of great preciousness in the sight of God and of the Church, a glorious sign of distinction and beauty. It is certainly also a emblem vividly known to those unseen forces that are arrayed in opposition to Christ and His people.

But saints are not "limited edition" Christians, for although there are many throughout church history whose lives have excelled in virtue, piety, and devotion, God would that every believer aspire to the very highest and noblest to which he can possibly attain. Their identifying marks may not include the signs of physical mistreatment for their witness, but they definitely

will be readily apparent to those with eyes to see. What are some of these? There are three which I would like to discuss.

Saints include those who strive to process each and every occurrence in life as that which has been ordered by the providential hand of a loving, personal God. This includes the very best that happens to them, and, most significantly, the very worst. And this is not because they've read any books purporting to explain "why bad things happen to good people". Living close to God, determined to draw as near as possible to the unsurpassed light of His holiness, they do not bother pondering their own goodness. Rather, they have given themselves completely over to God, without qualification, for whatever use He may choose for their lives. They have become "whole burnt offerings" on the altar of His love, ready to be entirely consumed, reserving nothing whatsoever of themselves for their own use. Since they see and acknowledge His hand in all things, they are free from the bitterness which infects and fills the hearts of those who, on some level, hate or disapprove of their circumstances, lament their lot in life, and are consumed with self-pity. In place of the anger and resentment whose object ultimately is not the people and circumstances which have brought them, but the God who has permitted them, there is cheerful resignation. Like the imprisoned saints of old, they kiss the very shackles that bind them.

The consequence for them is that their suffering is not only merely ennobled, but is elevated to something sacred. Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians of His struggles: *I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church* (Colossians 1:24). This is a remarkable statement, because it allows the saints —God's holy people— to participate personally in the sufferings of their Lord in a manner that somehow actually completes them. Call this kind of a life an extremely resourceful one, because it considers nothing wasted, at all: "I lost my job", It is not wasted. "I am in the grips of severe illness." It is not wasted. "I have undergone the sorrow of a divided family, and a host of disappointed hopes and dreams." It is not wasted. "Advancing age has placed me in severe limitations." It is not wasted. Receiving them as a sharing in the cross of Christ, they now become my greatest good, the dearest friends of my soul, rather than that which I loathe and fear.

Saints, then, make the most of everything, for their Lord's sake. But what else characterizes them? Saints practice the art of dying. *I die daily* are Paul's strange words to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:31b). He later wrote to them of the experiences of the apostles:

[We are] *always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh.* (2 Cor. 4:10, 11)

This is certainly most clearly demonstrated in those who are violently treated for their faith. But it is also the chosen way of life for those of any time and place who desire it. Death. Death to self, to ambition, to pleasure for pleasure's sake, to temptation, to the world and everything it of-

fers. Those who practice dying anticipate that these multiple deaths will in the end provide them with resurrection to something far greater and more wonderful, because they observe that their Lord has already walked that path, and the saints of old have trodden it behind Him. Because they are accustomed to dying, they are slaves to nothing and no one. And if we observe them at the hour of their final departure, we will notice that they view the transition they are about to make as a seamless one. They hardly appear to acknowledge any frontier at all between this world and the one to come. They have by faith dwelt already so habitually in the land of their destination that it's as if they have always belonged there. All that they have ever cared to truly possess, their *treasures* (Matthew 6:21), have been sent on ahead of them, and there they await them. Is there an otherworldly quality to them? Certainly, because their vision, informed by their faith, sees this material world as the mere servant of another of which all of this world's attributes are simply tokens.

This brings us to another and last quality we associate with the saints: they hold all things lightly, because they regard all of them not as ends in themselves, but as a means of attaining to God's eternal Kingdom. Normally we associate the idea of a loose grip with carelessness, or unconcern, or misuse. But this is not what we are considering here. A famous quote from the martyred missionary Jim Elliot comes to mind: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." The saint knows in the very deepest reaches of his heart that anything, or anyone — whether family, or friends, or house, or home, or job, or country, or reputation, or cherished dreams — *anything* that he grips too tightly, which even unconsciously he claims inappropriate possession of, can be lost, can be wrenched away from him. But why is it so? Because ultimately God will require all things of us, in order that nothing remain that would come between the soul and Him. That which we will not allow Him in His infinite love to remove, He is unable to return to us in that exalted and permanent form in which He has purposed to transform all that He has given to us here. Knowing this, does the saint love his loved ones less fervently? Is he so heavenly minded that he is of no earthly good? Does he disdain his human connections, trampling those around him while his head is in the clouds? The answer is "no". But he holds everything in such a manner as to be ready to yield it immediately to God, when God requires it.

We have touched upon three specific qualities that serve as brand marks of sainthood: an acceptance of the providential, whether good or bad; making daily death so familiar that it becomes a way of life; and maintaining a studiedly cautious hold upon each and every element of this life. As we consider these things, we should remember that no saint claims perfection. Like St. Paul, they declare...

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things

St. Thomas Anglican Church, Ellsworth, ME, November 1st, 2015: (All Saints' Day, Trinity XXII)

Fr. Ed Kalish

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which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. (Colossians 3:12-15)

No brand feels good when it is applied. And once stamped upon us, it will mark us forever. It can never be erased. Is that your desire? Is it mine?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.