

Drawing the Saints Close

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Not long ago, I was discussing the saints with a group of nine- to twelve-year-old children. After I mentioned that each of us is called by God to be a saint, a little girl asked, “But do *you* want to be a saint?”

“Yes,” I answered, reflexively.

“But do you really want to be one?” she asked, with a bit more skepticism than I would prefer to acknowledge.

I thought about it for a moment. “Yes, I do,” I said. “It isn’t important to me to be a canonized saint, one of the ones whose intercession we have been asking for just now, but I would very much like to be a saint.”

As I was thinking about the girl’s skepticism later, I realized that the saints can seem very far away. Sometimes we focus on details of piety or asceticism that are removed from our everyday experience. The saints, however, were human just as we are human, and their lives were filled with experiences similar to ours. On closer study, many saints are incredibly relatable.

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In the same group, a girl came to me after looking at depictions of the saints and said, “in the early Church, the women all look different from one another, but then it’s almost all women religious and queens.” It was clear that she was looking for a more diverse image of what holiness can look like for women. I mentioned to her that St. Zelig Martin was a successful businesswoman and that St. Gianna Beretta Molla was a doctor, and that both were also mothers. She resumed her research, not only interested in those two, but realizing that even those who looked the same on first glance had among them tremendous variety in their lived experience.

Children love to hear stories of the saints. These ordinary men and women who lived extraordinarily inspire them,



By learning about the saints, children will discover that there are many ways to follow Jesus.

give them examples of what holiness looks like, and demonstrate that there is no one way to follow Jesus. Exposing children to a variety of these stories gives them an opportunity to find a saint with whom they have a connection, whom they might ask to intercede for them and whom they might look to as a model for emulation.

The liturgical calendar hanging in our dining room reminds us that the rhythm of the year is punctuated by celebrations of these holy men and women. Our family celebrates the feast days of the saints whose names were given to our children by going out for ice cream. We make beautiful saint books available in our home for our children to look at for inspiration. A friend and her daughters have a saint of the month. They have no method to

choosing these saints; they just select them randomly. Her younger daughter was interested in chess, so she chose St. Teresa of Avila, the patron of that game. The lack of a comprehensive structure makes no difference to her girls, who love the tradition.

If a particular saint seems to resonate with your child, provide that natural interest an opportunity to grow with a holy card or a book about the person. Look up prayers that the person loved or wrote and prayers asking for his or her intercession. Many children love St. Francis because of his connection to animals, the poor, and peace. There are dozens of beautiful children’s books about his life. Sometimes interest in one saint can lead to interest in another. Many saints had particular devotion to a man or a woman who came before them, and children may want to know why, sparking a new devotion. We can never have too many friends in heaven.

As children grow older, you can ask them to think about the lives of the saints more deeply. How did they live a life of heroic virtue? What challenges did they face? How do you want to grow to be more like them? Perhaps someday some future boy or girl will be reflecting on the life of your child, hoping to grow in holiness, inspired by his or her life.