

Wisdom from the Saints



Christopher News Notes

TO WHOM DO YOU TURN FOR WISDOM? Whether we need common-sense advice or encouragement and inspiration, most of us turn to family members and friends first. Depending on the nature of the problem or challenge, we might then widen our search to include health care professionals, experts in a field, legal counsel, or spiritual direction.

As Catholics, though, we may be overlooking the most powerful source of wisdom at our disposal—the saints.

Seeking wisdom from the saints—our friends in faith—might at first seem counterintuitive.

We honor the saints, sure, and occasionally ask their patronage in a reflexive sort of way. (The older we get, the more we keep St. Anthony busy, finding our keys.) But how can people no longer among us, people who may have walked the earth centuries or even millennia ago, be much help to us today?

Wisdom to Guide Us Home

"We honor the saints by placing them on pedestals that distance them from us. When we get to know the saints a little better, however, the imagined distance shrinks."

—Bert Ghezzi, *"The Voices of the Saints"*

There are two reasons why turning to the saints for wisdom makes great sense. The first is that saints were people. They were as human, as flawed, and as frequently confused as we are.

Angry teenagers, people in the wrong relationships, people who live for wealth and luxury, notorious sinners—the saints have been there. Who better to know what we are going through?

St. Margaret of Cortona was a rebellious teenager, angry at her stepmother and acting out in every way she could. At 17, Margaret ran away with a wealthy older man, thinking he would marry her; instead, he kept her as a mistress and she bore his son. After 10 years, Margaret's lover was murdered by rivals. The shock turned her life around. Margaret returned all the gifts he had given her. Rejected by her stepmother, she and her son took shelter at a Franciscan monastery, where her son became a friar and Margaret took vows as a Third Order member. She spent the rest of her life caring for the poorest of the poor.

The second reason is that wisdom, at heart, is much more than advice or counsel or problem-solving. It is a reminder—like a bucket of cold water in the face, or a welcome-home hug, depending on what we most need—of what is most important, of who and whose we truly are. Every choice or challenge we face in life, no matter how seemingly trivial or overwhelming, is meant

Getting to Know Them Better

Collections of stories about and quotes from saints can be a great way to get to know these wise spiritual friends. Here are a few to start with:

- ***My Life with the Saints***, by Father James L. Martin, SJ (Loyola Press). For more than 10 years, this witty collection has helped Catholics get to know wise saints and holy women and men.
- ***Super Girls and Halos: My Companions on the Quest for Truth, Justice, and Heroic Virtue***, by Maria Morera Johnson (Ave Maria Press). Saints and superheroes – what do they have in common?
- ***Saints Are Not Sad: Short Biographies of Joyful Saints***, assembled by Frank Sheed (Ignatius Press). This collection contains both familiar saints and surprises, with true joy in common.

to take us home to God, where the saints have gone before us.

Wisdom from Their Words

As with family members and friends, the saints most often impart wisdom through their words. If you think saints only thought about lofty theological issues, it will come as a pleasant surprise how many of them have shared words of practical, down-to-earth, even humorous advice.

St. Philip Neri was as far from gloomy as a saint could be. By the power of his sheer joy, he brought Christ to the people of Rome—in street corner conversations, in sermons as likely to be marked by jokes as by lofty theological aphorisms, through the order of young, prayerful men he founded. "A joyful heart is more easily made perfect than a downcast one," was Neri's maxim.

St. Katharine Drexel, who began her life as the privileged daughter of a Philadelphia financier, gave up her fortune and spent her life in the service of Native Americans and African-Americans at the height of oppression and segregation. She faced down Ku Klux Klan members and death threats, and held firmly to the wisdom of putting all things in God's hands.

"Peacefully do at each moment what at that moment ought to be done," Mother Katharine advised the sisters of the community she founded.

"If we do what each moment requires, we will eventually complete God's plan, whatever it is. We can trust God to take care of the master plan when we take care of the details."

St. Teresa of Ávila was a mystic with her feet on the ground. "Trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be," she said. And "If you fall sometimes, you must not be discouraged." And "God is often kinder than you think." And also, when her patience was tried by novices who took everything too seriously, "May God protect me from gloomy saints!"

"God calls us through what happens during our day: through the suffering and happiness of the people we live with, through the human interests of our colleagues and the things that make up our family life," St. Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of the Opus Dei movement, reminds us.

Wisdom from Their Lives

Of course, the wisdom of the saints is imparted in much more than their words. We learn from the way they lived. When in doubt or in need of direction, we can ask ourselves, What would the saints do?

Think of St. Joseph, the husband of Mary and protector of Jesus. We have not a word from him on record. But no example ever spoke more plainly. Faced with Mary's unexpected pregnancy, he took to heart his dreams and overcame his own pride.

Joseph said “Yes” to God’s will with his actions as loudly as Mary did with her lips, led all his life by love and faith.

“The Church gives us saints as examples,” says *The Voices of the Saints* author Bert Ghezzi. “But the Church also expects us to familiarize ourselves with the saints and to discern wisdom for our lives from their words and actions.”

Whatever situations we face, a saint has faced them, too. Saints have made very bad choices, and come back from them. They have experienced terrible marriages and fallen into impossible debt. They’ve endured every illness or disability we can think of. And through it all, they have acted in ways that help us focus on the big picture.

St. Camillus de Lellis, one of 141 “saints with disabilities” whose stories are told in Pia Matthews’ book *God’s Wild Flowers*, is honored as the patron of doctors for his work with plague victims. But Camillus himself was a wounded healer, disabled throughout his life by a leg injury suffered when he was a young soldier. The injury kept him from being accepted as a Capuchin Franciscan, but it didn’t keep Camillus from founding his own order of hospital workers in Rome. Unable to travel, Camillus sent members of his order to the battlefronts in Croatia and Hungary—the first field hospital, tending to injuries like Camillus’ own.

The lives of the saints speak to us in different ways. We might be deeply moved by the example of modern saints like Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati or St. Gianna Molla, people who lived very close to

us in time and did things—athletics, raising children—with which we can identify. Then again, we might find inspiration in the courage of saints whose deeds are legendary, like St. George and St. Joan of Arc.

Gaining wisdom from the lives of the saints does not mean we will imitate their every action. Most of us will not, we hope, face physical martyrdom, for example. But we can learn from them how to live our faith—and witness to it, which is what the word “martyr” means.

Wisdom in Prayer and Patronage

“Do not weep, for I shall be more useful to you after my death and I shall help you then more effectively than during my life.”

—St. Dominic, to his friars on his deathbed

Seeking the wisdom of the saints is not a one-way street. Our belief in the Communion of Saints—the connection among all believers, living and dead—means the saints are anxious to help us, too. We seek not only their wisdom but their intercession, their prayerful petitions to God on our behalf, which is a great way to nourish the family relationship that lets us turn to the saints in times of need.

And remember that the Church traditionally places almost every human activity, place, or trouble under the special patronage or protection of a saint. We ourselves have patron saints linked to our baptismal names, and guardian angels chosen for us by God. Seeking the patronage of the saints is no mere superstition. It is calling in the experts.

So if you need wisdom, don’t forget to call on your devoted friends: the saints.


“It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”

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Editor-in-Chief: Tony Rossi

The Christophers

5 Hanover Square, New York, NY 10004

212-759-4050 • 888-298-4050

mail@christophers.org • www.christophers.org

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“The best preparation for prayer is to read the lives of the saints, not from more curiosity, but quietly and with recollection a little at a time. And to pause whenever you feel your heart touched with devotion.”

—St. Philip Neri