

## You Are a Saint in Training



Christopher News Notes

**YOU ARE A SAINT IN TRAINING!** Don't laugh, we're being serious. When many of us hear the word "saint," we imagine people who have led perfect, sinless lives. But nothing could be further from the truth! The saints we honor throughout history were just as flawed as we are—and endured the same struggles we do. So when somebody tells you that you should aspire to be a saint, remind yourself that, with God's help, you have what it takes.

## The Simplicity of Saints

Though movies and TV shows often make it seem like people who die become angels, that's not actually what Christians believe. Instead, we affirm that souls who reach heaven become saints, participating fully in the eternal life and joy of God. For instance, in the jazz classic "When the Saints Go Marching In," the place they're marching into is heaven. And we are all invited to march along. So what obstacles might stand in our way?

A few years ago, Peggy Weber was in church for Good Friday services when the priest talked about Jesus loving us and dying for us. She looked around and got the feeling that all the congregants there were holier than she was. But Peggy soon realized she was playing the comparison game and selling herself short. And by reflecting on her own family, she recognized that holiness is not determined by earning theology degrees.

During a *Christopher Closeup* interview about her book *Enough as You Are: Overcoming Self-Doubt and Appreciating the Gift of You*, Peggy pointed out that her grandmother "came over from Ireland at age 18 with nothing in her pocket but her rosary beads and her faith—and she transmitted that faith to several generations beyond. She brought over all her brothers and sisters who had been orphaned and managed to build a life for so many people. When I was sitting at the college graduations of my children, I was crying, thinking that this woman could bring over a love of education and a love of faith so that my children could live that life."

Peggy's mom also taught her some valuable lessons: "My mother often said, 'I don't go to church for Father So-and-So, or for this meeting, or for that group. I go for God.' She always had her eye on the prize, on the Eucharist and her prayer life. Every afternoon, she had a Ziploc bag full of prayers that she'd pull out and pray, and she'd pull cards for the deceased. She let me know that it's the spiritual life and the focus on God that matters the most."

## Never Say You're a Bad Person

Former Director of The Christophers Father John Catoir spent years counseling people as part of his priestly ministry, including a stint leading a program for recovering addicts in New Jersey, called Eva's Village.

Through those experiences, he learned that "negative thinking will destroy your mental health...If you have a belief that you're not a good person, even though you're trying to be good, that undermines your mental health—and it has to be rooted out. If you can't say you're a saint, you can say, 'I'm a saint-in-training. I'm a good person, and I'm trying to get better.' But there's no way that you should say you're a bad person because God made you, and everything God made is good."

While there have been many saints who were well-educated, such as St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine, there were also some who were more simple, such as Canada's St. Andre Bessette, who is one of Peggy's favorites. She noted that he was sickly, could barely read, and was a lost soul of sorts. Yet he had a deep devotion to God, so his childhood pastor suggested Andre become a brother with the Congregation of Holy Cross. The pastor wrote a letter to the superior there, saying, "I am sending you a saint."

Andre followed this vocational calling, becoming a porter at Notre Dame College in Montreal, where he opened the door, closed the door, took messages, did the laundry, etc. "[You might think] 'This guy's not going to amount to much in terms of our world?'" noted Peggy. But the exact opposite was true. She explained, "When people came to the door, he would talk to them, he would comfort them, he would listen to them. And a million people filed past his casket after he died, because he became known as such a healing, wonderful, saintly man...If you said, 'Here's a formula for success: we're going to send a guy that can barely read to a monastery, and he's going to be a saint' – that's probably not what you'd think...and that's the beauty of it, the humility."

In terms of viewing our own potential for sainthood, Peggy concluded, "I think you have to be content and recognize, 'I have something to contribute to the world.' Think about what it is and be happy with that."

## A Saint in the Making

Teaching the faith to children in a relatable, interesting way is a goal for many parents and grandparents. For much of her career, Lisa Hendeby has been doing just that, as the founder of *CatholicMom.com* and as a children's book author.

One of her books is called *I Am a Saint in the Making*. During a *Christopher Closeup* interview, Lisa said that her talks at schools and parishes have taught her that children respond to their call to sainthood, even at their young ages: "They resonate towards understanding that they're called to live this life of love and mission in the world around them."

With illustrations by Katie Broussard, the book shares brief stories of a diverse group of saints that children can relate to on various levels. There is St. Juan Diego from Mexico, who was visited by Our Lady of Guadalupe; Blessed Augustus Tolton, an African American priest from the U.S. who began life as a slave; and St. Mary MacKillop from Australia, who helped provide educations for poor children.

Lisa explained, "One of our goals for the book was to have any child who picked it up be able to find somebody who looked a little bit like them...and that also spread this message that God equips us. He doesn't make saints who are born with a halo over their heads. No matter what our station in life, we have that calling."

Another aspect of the book's diversity is immediately apparent on the cover, which includes an

illustration of a girl in a wheelchair. Lisa knew she wanted to include that representation because “there are no limits on God’s ability to work through us. And certainly, that is the case with anyone who is challenged by some kind of physical or mental disability. They still have so much to teach us and so much love to share. Often, they do it in very profound ways.”

The book also offers tips to parents, including: “Tell your child the stories of saints in your family who have gone before you—and remember those loved ones in prayer by name.”

Lisa explained, “We all belong to a community of saints. So in our families, we all know and love our own saints in the making, or saints that we know rest in God’s embrace. To share their stories and to honor their memory is a beautiful thing...Most importantly, we remember to pray that our family members are resting with God. We should spend the rest of our lives doing that and hoping for the same for ourselves.”

## Saint Learns to Chill Out

At age 28, Saint Jane de Chantal of France was the mother of four young children when her husband was killed in an accident. As a result, she had to deal with numerous challenges, including a hot-tempered father-in-law who was having an affair with his housekeeper. Still, Jane aspired to live a holy life—but her efforts were marred by harsh perfectionism.



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

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During a *Christopher Closeup* interview about her book *The Heart of Perfection: How the Saints Taught Me to Trade My Dream of Perfect for God’s*, Christopher Award-winning author Colleen Carroll Campbell explained, “Jane was intense...She was skimping on sleep, she wasn’t eating enough, she was trying to pray around the clock. Meanwhile, everything was falling apart around her.”

Then Jane met future saint Francis de Sales who, in modern terms, taught her to chill out. Francis dispelled Jane’s notion that God wanted her to do everything perfectly and drive herself harder and harder.

Instead, Francis taught her, “The sacrifices God wants us to make for Him are the ones that choose us, not the ones we choose. Be gentle with the child who interrupts you. Decide not to gossip about those in-laws who drive you crazy. Abstain from one favorite food, but not from so much that you’re starving...Be patient with everyone, but above all with yourself.”

Colleen continued, “When Jane internalized this advice, she not only became more patient with herself, but it trickled down. She became more patient with the in-laws, the kids...Gradually, she grew into this paragon of gentleness...This is a transformation we can’t do through willpower alone. This has to be the grace of God. It’s amazing what that grace can do in the life of any perfectionist if we open our hearts to God’s dream of perfect for us rather than our own.”

All these examples of saintliness seem much more achievable now than when you started reading this News Note, right?

If you take small steps toward loving God and neighbor—and humbly accept God’s grace and guidance in your heart—you too will ultimately find yourself joining the saints as they march into heaven!

***“One should not wish to become a saint in four days, but step by step.”***

***—St. Philip Neri***