

What Is a Saint?

From Girardey's Conference Matter for Religious

A saint is a person who dreads sin more than all the evils in the world, and shuns it as much as death itself. A saint cannot bear sin in his soul. If, through frailty, he happens to commit a sin, remorse leaves him no rest, his sin weighs on him like a mountain, and he is satisfied and finds peace only after he has confessed it and expelled it from his heart. His motto is: "Hatred to sin! No sin!"

A saint is a person possessed of solid piety, profoundly convinced that prayer is as necessary to his soul as food to his body, for whom prayer is a necessity, a consolation; a person who essentially adheres to his spiritual exercises, and always does his best to perform them well.

A saint is a person who loves Jesus, sympathizes with Jesus, suffers when he sees Jesus offended, and delights whenever he has the occasion to procure His glory. "Love," says St. Augustine, "is the mark of the elect; it indicates who are the children of God and separates them from the children of Satan; it distinguishes the elect from the reprobates, and marks the degree of the soul's holiness. The soul possessing a great degree of charity, is great and exalted in sanctity; the soul that has only a middling degree, is not great in virtue; and the soul devoid of charity, is nothing, for St. Paul says: 'If I have not charity, I am nothing' " (1 Cor. 13.2).

A saint is a person who is obedient, who confides entirely in his superiors and allows himself to be led as a child. St. Philip Neri often said that holiness consists in giving up one's will. In religious obedience and sanctity are synonymous. Wherefore a perfectly obedient religious is a saint. Obedience is the highroad to heaven. Jesus first walked in it as the Guide of the predestined; all the saints have followed Him in it, and not one of them reached heaven by any other way.

A saint is a person who is humble, who combats pride without ceasing, who, far from seeking to domineer over others, makes himself the least and the servant of all. "Learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart" (Matt. 11.29). All the saints frequented the school of Jesus Christ and learned humility from Him; all were models of this virtue and were marked with this character of predestination.

A saint is a mortified person, who fears neither sufferings, temptations, nor any trials whatever. Those whom God has predestined, He rendered conformable to Jesus crucified; that is, He made them go through sufferings and hardships. "Without trials, temptations and contradictions," says St. John Chrysostom, "there is no victory, because there is no combat; no crown, because there is no virtue." Hence a sensual man, a man without temptations and trials, is not a saint.

There is no saint that lacks these six characteristics, and no religious can pretend to be holy, unless he possesses them or earnestly strives to acquire them. They are so essentially the elements of holiness, that if one of them is wanting, there is no holiness.. He who does not dread sin and easily commits it, is not a saint, however great and brilliant his good qualities. A proud man is not a saint, were he even to perform miracles. He who disobeys or neglects to perform the orders of his superior, in order to do his own

will, even were he to spend all his life in prayer and good works, is not a saint. The fear of sin, solid piety, humility, obedience and mortification are, then, the foundation of holiness. Every edifice of perfection which does not rest on these foundations, crumbles of itself or is carried away by the wind of temptations. No one is a saint, unless he shuns sin, unless he is humble and mortified. "Pride," says St. Augustine, "does not ascend to heaven; disobedience, avarice, lust, sensuality, and every other vice or defect, does not ascend to heaven with Jesus Christ." Hence, if we wish to be saints and ascend to heaven, we must combat sin, our passions, correct our defects and replace them with solid virtues:

A saint is a light and a sun that enlightens and vivifies all around him. We may say of every saint what Jesus Christ said of John Baptist, that he was a burning and shining light. The saints are burning lamps, because they burn with the love of God, and spread around them the sweet warmth of charity; they, are shining lamps, because they enlighten all among whom they live and show them the way to salvation. The just man, says the Holy Ghost, lights up the way for his companions, whilst the sinner leads astray those who witness his wicked life.

A saint is a model for everyone, a book in which the learned and the illiterate are able to read all that it behooves them to do in order to secure their salvation. "A saint," says Tertullian, "is an abridgment of the Gospel; his good example inspires the love of virtue, and induces all to practise it; his every action condemns all evil and sin."

A saint is the instrument of God's goodness and mercy, a channel through which He causes His graces to flow to all men, a powerful means of salvation for a whole people. In fact, a saint suffices to sanctify not only a whole family, a parish, a city, but even a whole country. St. Vincent Ferrer brought back to God Spain and France; St. Francis Xavier conquered whole kingdoms to Jesus Christ.

A saint is a man like ourselves. Many persons fancy that the saints did not participate in Adam's fall, that virtue was natural to them, that it cost them no effort, no sacrifice to do good. This is a great mistake. The saints were men like ourselves, as inclined by nature to evil as we are, and had in themselves, as well as we, the germs of all passions and vices, and had also to struggle against the same enemies, the flesh, the world, the devil and sin. They were subject to the same temptations, and the most of them had greater and longer trials than we. They were as weak as we, met with the same hindrances, the same dangers, the same difficulties as we to remain in the grace of God and do good. It cost them constant violence to practise virtue and correspond with divine grace.

The saints were always contented and never complained of the times, of the hardships they had to undergo, or the inclemency of the seasons. With the psalmist they would say: "Ye rains, bless the Lord; ye winds and storms, heat of summer, cold of winter, snow and ice, bless the Lord." Whatever happened to them was an occasion of thanking God and practising self-denial and mortification. They were content wherever obedience would send them, because they everywhere found God, the sole object of their love. But sensual men, being all occupied in gratifying nature, spend their lives in protecting themselves against the inclemency of the climate and of the seasons; at one time they complain that the place or country they are in does not suit them; at another of the cold, or of the heat which debilitates or oppresses them; all this because they lack the spirit of self-denial.

The saints never complain of their employment, for, whatever it may be, they like it, because God through His representative, their superior, entrusted it to them. If it is burdensome, they like it so much the more, as being more meritorious; if it is very humiliating, they cherish it still more as a means of practising humility; they are never heard to say, like the imperfect: "I am not made for that kind of work; I do not like it; it is too much, too difficult for me; it does not agree with me; it is a disgrace for me; it is given to me, because no one likes it, no one else would have it; so and so are the cause that it is given to me." Those who are wanting in virtue, often wish to do what they cannot or should not do. The very fact that obedience imposes a certain duty on them, suffices to give them an aversion for it. They complain of their employment through inconstancy, caprice, ambition, the desire of a better one, or because they meet with some difficulty or hardship in its discharge. These religious are like some sick persons who never feel comfortable in a position and constantly ask to be helped to change it, and when this is done, desire immediately another change.

The saints never complain of their superiors, because they see in them the person of Jesus Christ, and receive their orders as coming from God Himself. They never consider the superior's personal qualities or defects for in him they see but one thing, the authority God has entrusted to him, by making him His representative. They never examine and never permit themselves to judge what he commands them. They leave this to the superior to whom it belongs, and think only of obeying. Since they are guided by these principles, all that the superior does and requires seems good to them, and therefore they are never tempted or inclined to complain.

The religious who are peevish or wanting in virtue, easily complain, are discouraged by trifles, offended at a gesture, look or word of their superior. Seeing in him only an ordinary man, they discover defects in him and complain about almost everything he says and does. At one time, the superior is too young and, as they say, wanting in experience, prudence, tact and consideration for others; at another, he is too old, too cranky, too hard to get along with, too positive, too absolute, an old foggy, and pays no attention to what is said to him. They complain of being refused a permission, or because they are required to keep the Rule, or are reproved for their faults. How miserable is a superior whose subjects are devoid of virtue and a good spirit! On the contrary, how happy the superior whose subjects possess a truly religious spirit!

The saints never complain of their brethren nor of those they live with. In their relations with their neighbor, they always bear in mind these words of St. Paul: "Put on the bowels of mercy, bearing with one another" (Col. 3.12). They are kind towards all men. Their heart overflows with compassion, indulgence and pity for the miseries of others. They never yield to suspicions or rash judgments, or to envy and jealousy; they bear, without complaining, their neighbor's defects, and help him, by means of good example and charitable admonitions, to correct them. However disagreeable his ways and his character, they bear all so cheerfully, that no one may even guess how much it costs them to practise fraternal charity.

Moreover, they bear with his corporal infirmities and render him, without repugnance, all the services his state may require; also with his wrongs, ill manners, impatience, ingratitude, dissimulating how much it costs them to do so, and constantly showing him every attention and kindness. They carry the burdens of their neighbor, that is, his task by helping him to perform it, and his sorrows and afflictions, by sympathizing

with him, consoling and encouraging him. Finally, far from complaining about him, they seek to please him in all that is lawful, by sacrificing their own tastes, their rest, doing all they can to assist and give him pleasure.

Those religious whose character is evil and their virtue not solid, see usually only the defects of their neighbor, and find plenty of matter for blame, censure and criticism in him. A word, a forgetfulness, an inadvertence, a trifle on the part of their neighbor irritates, angers them, and causes them to utter loud and bitter complaints. They expect others to be perfect and faultless, will not forgive them anything, whilst their own faults, defects and selfishness make them a burden and a cross to those who have to live with them.

The saints never complain of their enemies and persecutors; they take their revenge by doing good to them. St. Catharine of Siena for a long time nursed a sick woman who had blackened her reputation. St. Adjutus sold his garden and even his best clothes to relieve the distress of one of his greatest enemies. St. Ambrose granted a pension to a man who had attempted to murder him. St. Sabinus cured the tyrant who had cut off his hand. St. Jane constantly prayed for her enemies, so that it was said of her: "It suffices to ill-treat her, in order to have a large share in her prayers." "When some persons speak ill of me," said St. Teresa, "I feel that my love for them increases." Thus act the saints; they render good for evil, suffer all and never complain of any one; their example condemns those spiteful persons, who tear up the reputation of those they complain of; who pout for weeks and months, because some one did or said something that displeased them, who never forgive a mistake, a want of attention, an offense, but, sooner or later, have their revenge on those that displeased them.

The saints never complain of what the community gives them, nor of the treatment they receive. They profit by every occasion to mortify themselves, and are satisfied with the food, with their room, furniture and clothing. "Sensual men," says a pious author, "draw a bad spirit in the refectory, whilst the saints draw the spirit of mortification and great merits for heaven. All is good enough for the saints, and, far from complaining, they everywhere desire and seek what is poorest and most disagreeable." For the imperfect nothing is good enough!

The saints never complain of their corporal infirmities. With holy Job they say: "God gave me health, and He hath taken it away; may His holy name be blessed!" With St. Paul they say also: "In infirmity virtue is rendered perfect." And with St. Augustine: "Lord, cut and burn me here below, but spare me in eternity." "Sickness," says St. Vincent de Paul, "is not an evil to be feared, but a very effective means of sanctification; to murmur when God sends it to us, is to complain of the good He does us." The saints understand this and, far from complaining of their sickness, they thank Him for it. St. Lidwina lay on her hard couch for thirty-eight years, covered with frightful sores and a prey to most intense pains, and never complained. St. Clara was ill for twenty-eight years and never uttered a groan. St. Theodore had all his life a large and painful sore, and was wont to say that God had given it to him to enable him to thank Him every day. "My sisters," said St. Teresa to her nuns, "learn how to bear your infirmities without letting others know them." For forty years she herself suffered great pains, and never complained.

The religious who are weak-minded and deficient in virtue, when ill or infirm, instead of imitating the saints, do nothing but complain, lie down and make use of every

available remedy. It is useless to speak to them of the virtues of their state, of their tasks, of the Rule; they are wholly absorbed with the care of their puny self, and consider everything lawful in order to find relief or cure.

The saints do not complain of the temptations and trials that fall to their lot, because they know how necessary these are to strengthen them in virtue and to give them opportunities of gaining merit. In temptation they do these three things: first, they watch over themselves, in order to remove dangers, and carefully combat temptations by some act of virtue, and especially by contempt; secondly, they remain cheerful, and full of holy joy and confidence in God; and thirdly, they pray earnestly every day to God for the grace never to offend Him.

One of the most dangerous snares of the devil, into which weak souls often fall, is to have too great a fear of temptation, to get disturbed and discouraged at being strongly and frequently tempted. We should not allow ourselves to be caught in this snare, for he who is discouraged is already half overcome. Let us imitate the saints, and temptations will serve us as means of Sanctification and opportunities of showing our fidelity to God.

Finally, the saints do not complain even of their defects, but unceasingly strive to correct them. Their habitual disposition is to be always cheerful, joyful and contented. But whence come the contentment and joy visible in their very countenances? From their holy life, for a holy and pious life is always cheerful. From their good conscience, for, asks St. Bernard, "what is richer, sweeter and more secure than a good conscience?" From the thought of heaven and the reward prepared for them. "The glory that awaits me," said St. Francis of Assisi, "is so great, that all sufferings fill me with joy."

Holy joy and contentment in the service of God are a great proof of solid virtue and holiness. St. Bonaventure declares that "spiritual joy is a sure sign that sanctifying grace dwells in the soul." Discontent, chagrin, complaints, murmurs and sadness, on the contrary, are a bad sign, and when you see a man afflicted with this disease, pray for him, for he greatly needs it.