

Saints: Seventy Stories of Faith

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“Saints are venerated not because they are essentially different from us but because they are essentially the same,” writes Bonfante-Warren in her introduction. The stories here continually remind readers of this. They show fallible people who had bad tempers and bad habits, who made mistakes in their ministrations, who didn’t always listen to the voices that spoke to them, who even had senses of humor, such as Saint Teresa of Avila who yelled to God upon being turned over in a carriage, “No wonder you have so few friends, since this is the way you treat them!”

Nor were their lives all painstaking prayer, hardship and sacrifice. Saint Vincent de Paul’s life shows more like an Erroll Flynn movie: he was captured by pirates and sold into slavery, then escaped from slavery and did clandestine work for King Henry IV. He also was exceedingly handsome and popular at court. Saints also often have expertise in areas other than the ones they are most associated with. Saint Nicholas, for instance, who is typically associated with gift giving at Christmas is also called upon by sailors in a storm at sea.

The saints are cataloged into one of ten categories, such as hermits, healers, teachers or founders of a religious order. The biographies are cursory, but contain the dramatic highlights of each saint’s life as well as set an historical context. These stories range from sounding suspiciously like fairy tales, like Saint George who slayed the dragon and saved the king’s daughter, to relatively modern stories that read like solid social history, like Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton who founded the first parochial schools in the early 1800s.

Saints is a dramatic book and by no means frivolous reading. The artwork, which is almost half of the book, is both somber and graphic. It mostly represents Gothic and early Renaissance style, though there are exceptions such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s painting of Joan of Arc and a photograph of Saint Theresa of Lisieux. Saints is beautifully laid out; each page is lined with a medieval border and the side bars look like illuminated manuscripts.

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