

Introduction

I never did love the Saints.

Because I never knew them.

Oh, I could tell you the patron Saint of athletes or musicians. But the Saints I knew were dull outlines of immaculate lives, saccharine plaster images gazing vapidly heavenward. And I tried to be holy like that; I really did. But God made me passionate and intense, and the more I tried to become sweet and mild, the more I felt I would never be anything but wrong.

Eventually I heard about St. Teresa of Avila, contented myself that there was at least one fiery female Saint, and moved on. I knew whom God was calling me to be, and if that didn't fit in a stained glass window, so be it.

But then I stumbled across a book that told the stories of the Saints—not just the dates, accomplishments, and implausible encounters with mythical beasts but also the sorrow, struggle, and idiosyncrasies. Suddenly I realized that these were real people, broken people made whole by grace, and that far from being the impossible standard I'd thought they represented, they offered nothing but hope.

There is, in so many lives, a hidden shame, a conviction that some aspect of your life makes you unloved and unlovable, even by God himself. Again and again I've seen the lives of the Saints speak the love of Jesus into that brokenness, showing the glory of a grace-filled life after abuse or abortion, amid disability or divorce. The Saints stand as witnesses to people who are certain they can't be holy if they have a mental illness, if their parents

are unmarried, if prayer is always hard for them, if their lives are unremarkable, if they're too loud or too quiet, too smart or too slow. They stand beside us as people who've sinned, suffered, and struggled and come through to the other side, radiant with the glory of God.

The men, women, and children who've been raised to the altar have almost nothing in common with one another. They're princes and peasants, geniuses and fools. Some hardly sinned a day in their lives; others lived lives so vile even HBO might be tempted to censor them. There are explorers and housewives, theologians and farmers, people recognized as great even by a world that despises the Church, and others so ordinary that those closest to them hardly noticed anything special.

This is the legacy that's been handed to us: a Church filled with Saints so entirely different from one another that we who follow in their footsteps are free to pursue holiness in our own unique way. They stand before us as witnesses that holiness is possible, but they offer a challenge as well. Your addiction is no excuse, they tell us. Your broken home is no excuse. Your timidity, your inclination to rage, your disinclination to pray—there are no circumstances or characteristics that make holiness unattainable, which means every one of us is called to run after Jesus, however often we may stumble.

And Saints aren't just models. They're friends, older brothers and sisters who love us more than we've ever loved before. The stories in this book aren't just a quick shot in the arm to get you going on a tough day. They're an introduction to your family, to the heroes who've gone before who are alive in Christ and eager to pray for you, to walk with you, to cheer you on as you fight your way through this valley of tears.

This is why I love the Saints. Because while the Lord is never far from us, there are times when it seems impossible that he might be with us, suffering alongside us, handing his life over for us. In darkness, in shame, in wandering confusion, we may

begin to feel that his perfect life has no connection to ours. We may feel overwhelmed by our addictions, our insurmountable circumstances, our suffering into which it seems God speaks no word of comfort.

But the Saints have suffered as we do. They have been tempted as we are. They lived with mental illness, chronic illness, and abusive families; with rage, shame, and fear; and with aspirations, brilliance, and wild success. They endured racism, torture, drudgery, disillusionment, and unfulfilled longings. They give us hope for what good might come and a witness of how to find peace if it doesn't. And the light they shed on our lives leads us back to the one who holds us in all our struggles and joys.

Every Saint I've loved has taught me to love Jesus better, and inspired me to embrace my cross once again and trust in this love that calls me ever onward. This is why I tell their stories. Because the more we know of them, the more we know of him. The more we see how he loved them in their brokenness, the more we believe in his love for us. The more we witness their faithfulness in suffering, the more we believe that God can bring good through the ugliness that threatens to overwhelm us. Praise God for this Church of ours that spans the great divide and calls us to join them around the throne of the one who loves us every bit as much as he loves them. Through their intercession, may every one of us become a saint.

How to Use This Book

This is a book of stories, not an encyclopedia. Feel free to start at page 1 and keep reading to the end, skim the table of contents for stories that jump out at you, or turn to the back, where you'll find the indices. Then again, maybe just say a little prayer and flip and point to see if the Holy Spirit has a new Saintly friend to offer you.

In this book, I'll use the term "Saint" to refer to anyone who is an official Saint in the Catholic Church or is on the path to

canonization: Servants of God, Venerables, and Blesseds. Though the official title Saint refers only to those who have been put forward by the Church for universal veneration, my use of the term here isn't intended to preemptively canonize anyone or to make assertions about the eternal fate of those men and women on whose sanctity the Church hasn't yet officially spoken. Instead, it's a shorthand intended to group all those who have been presented as models of Christian living, whether or not they have yet been canonized.

As you read this book, you'll notice these different titles being used. It may be helpful to know what each term signifies. A Saint, of course, is a person who has been declared to be in heaven, and is offered by the Church for universal veneration. For nearly a thousand years, this declaration has come through an official canonization from Rome, usually at the end of a long process. For many centuries, though, holy men and women were declared Saints by their local bishops, generally as a response to popular acclaim. St. Peter, for example, was never canonized in a formal ceremony, but his status as a Saint is not in question.

Today, when a cause for canonization is officially opened, the person in question is given the title **Servant of God**. This title serves to indicate that there is an open cause for canonization but is not a judgment as to the person's holiness. At this point, research is still being done to make the person's case.

Once the Congregation for the Causes of Saints has read and reviewed the materials submitted on behalf of the Servant of God, they determine whether her life demonstrated heroic virtue. If so, a decree of heroic virtue is issued and the person is given the title Venerable Servant of God and usually referred to as **Venerable**. At this point, there has been no assertion as to the Venerable's presence in heaven. She still has no feast day, and permission has not been granted to build churches in her honor, but the faithful are permitted to seek miracles through her intercession.

Usually, the cause of a Venerable is advanced by the verification of a miracle. This miracle must have taken place through the Venerable's intercession after his death and must be unexplainable by science. However, the requirement of this first miracle can be waived if the Venerable has been officially declared a martyr. At the beatification, it is declared to be "worthy of belief" that the **Blessed** (also referred to as a *beatus/beata*) is in heaven. He is given a feast day and, with special permission, a parish may be named in his honor. Still, the Blessed is put forward for limited public veneration; though any individual may revere him, he is celebrated in the liturgy only in certain dioceses (generally where he lived) or religious communities.

Finally, a verified miracle is required for canonization. Once this miracle has been approved, a canonization Mass is scheduled, after which the newly minted **Saint** is held up as a model for the universal Church, to be honored throughout the world. Occasionally this last step is bypassed by the Holy Father, who may choose to perform an equivalent or equipollent canonization for a long-revered Blessed.

In this book, I will use the term "Saint" loosely, to refer to all men and women who are at any step in this process. Where the word "saint" appears, it refers to anybody in heaven, whether or not they are known to any on earth. Few who read this book will ever become Saints, but it is my fervent hope that every single person who reads it will one day be a saint, surrounded by the Saints who fill these pages. All you holy men and women, pray for us!

Part 1

Saints Who Defied Expectations

I was always quite sure that there was one way to be a Saint. One had to be meek and pious, speaking only in a cheerful whisper, with no inclination to shout or rage or laugh with glee. Unfortunately for me, I thought, fitting into that mold would take a lifetime of cramming my enormous, intense, emotional self into the confines of holiness. I felt absolutely smothered by the saccharine stories of quiet, pleasant Saints.

But then I heard a little bit about St. Teresa of Avila, and I realized that maybe a handful of the Saints were rather more like me than the Snow White image of sanctity I'd built up in my head. Then, as I began to study the Saints, I realized that many of them were decidedly unsaintly, at least by the qualifications I'd imagined. Some of them were even wild, intense, emotional, and unrestrained—just like me.

I found out years later that I wasn't the only person with this misconception but that others had entirely different misunderstandings of holiness. My brilliant friends looked at the simpleminded Saints and thought the academically minded didn't belong in their ranks. My less intellectual friends were sure that if they couldn't be St. Thomas Aquinas, they might as well

give up. The quiet ones thought they had to shout the name of Jesus from the rooftops. The excitable ones thought only mellow people could be Saints.

Yet the Saints stood in mute defiance of every box we tried to put them in. Because there is no one way to be holy, nor even a thousand ways to be holy. There are as many ways to be holy as there are souls ever created. This section is filled with Saints who will surprise you—a tough-as-nails poet, a brilliant scientist, a chain-smoking journalist, and a mischievous smuggler. There may not be anyone in this book who speaks to the particular aspect of your personality that you worry disqualifies you for holiness, but there's someone in heaven with that attribute. I can almost guarantee it.



BL. CATHERINE JARRIGE

*A Mischievous Woman
Who Smuggled Priests to Safety*



(1754–1836) ✱ Country: France
Feast Day: July 4

How does a high-spirited, mischievous, prank-pulling little girl become a Saint? By growing into a high-spirited, mischievous, prank-pulling adult—particularly if the pranks are pulled on the persecutors of the Church.

Bl. Catherine Jarrige was the youngest of seven children born to a poor French farmer. She was a sweet child—called “the little nun” by those who knew her—but was fond of practical jokes and innocent naughtiness. At age nine she began work as a servant, and trained as a lace maker at age thirteen. Despite the hard work that filled her days, Catherine always had time to dance, particularly the traditional bourrée.

Catinon, as she was called, was a woman full of life and joy, but she was more than just a girl who loved to dance. When Catherine got off work, she would walk the streets begging alms for the poor. Gradually her love of the Lord and the poor led her to imitate St. Catherine of Siena, her patron Saint, and take vows as a lay Dominican. “Catinon Menette” (Cathy the little nun) stopped dancing, feeling it improper for a consecrated woman. But it wasn’t easy; in fact, years later she said, “The greatest sacrifice that I made in my life is that of dancing.”¹ Still, her mischievous spirit remained and would serve her well during the difficult years to come.

In 1789, the French Revolution began. By the end of 1791, priests who refused to pledge their allegiance to the anti-Catholic government (“non-juring” priests) were imprisoned. Within two years, the sentence became immediate death for all non-juring priests and anyone found helping them.

Catherine’s hour had come. This was a time not for pious church ladies (though their prayers must surely have helped) but rather for loud, powerful, brazen women. Catherine had been born for this; she set to work saving the lives of every priest she could, creating an underground system to hide priests and smuggle them where they were needed. She provided them with vestments and with bread and wine to celebrate Mass, hidden in the hermetically sealed copper pockets she tied around her waist after fabric pockets proved inadequate for her needs. She brought them babies to baptize, led them to families in need of sacraments, and hid them in the forest. She dressed like a revolutionary, sang revolutionary songs to pass unquestioned by sentries, and begged food from revolutionaries themselves—food that she then gave to starving priests.

It wasn’t always easy, of course. Some nights Catherine would sneak through the forest under cover of darkness, wading through mud up to her ankles to bring supplies to needy priests, only to turn around immediately on arriving and return to town to continue her work. Other times, she slept in the forest. Sometimes the priests would move undetected under cover of darkness, aided by Catherine’s network of informers among the revolutionaries. Other times, they came face-to-face with soldiers. Once, Catherine was guiding two priests through the streets when she and the woman aiding her saw a revolutionary ahead. Thinking quickly, Catherine told the priests to pretend to be drunk, while she and her companion nagged and shrieked at them as though they were beleaguered wives dragging their husbands home from a bar. Seeing this spectacle, their enemy taunted the men, insisting that if *his* wife spoke to him thus he’d

throw her off a bridge. At this, Catherine turned on him and began to hurl abuse at him. Finally, she threatened to knock him out, at which the man took his leave (while the two priests and their guides tried desperately not to erupt in laughter).²

Though at first Catherine told “white lies” to protect the priests, she found that these untruths tormented her conscience. So she looked for ways to speak only the truth, though often in a sarcastic tone of voice. When carrying a chalice (covered in straw) in her apron, she was stopped and asked what she was carrying. “A chalice!” cunning Catherine spat. “Would you like to see it?” When she opened her apron to reveal the straw, the soldiers took her truthful response for sarcasm and let her pass.³ Another time, she was stopped on her way home from taking food to hidden priests. When asked where she’d come from, she said, “Over there!” “But where over there?” she was asked. “Over there!” she repeated, until the exasperated soldiers let her go.⁴

For nine years Catherine worked to protect the priests of her region and is credited with saving the lives of hundreds of priests and making the sacraments available to thousands of the faithful. She was most proud of the fact that over a stretch of two years there was not one person in her town who went unbaptized or died without the sacraments. In a time when being a priest was a capital crime, this was nothing short of miraculous. Only once did a priest she was protecting get caught, and the fearless little Dominican walked boldly to his death with him. After he died, Catherine took the blood of this priest, Ven. François Filiol, and applied it to the eyes of a blind child whose sight was immediately restored.

Catherine was arrested more than once. In court, when she couldn’t answer a question truthfully without incriminating anyone, she would just make the Sign of the Cross and remain silent. After watching this several times, the court dismissed her, thinking her insane. One time she was imprisoned, but she

was so popular that she was released for fear of what the people would do if she were killed.

After ten years, the persecution of the Church ended and Catherine looked to serve where the need was greatest: begging for the poor. By this time, her reputation was so great that she had no trouble obtaining what she needed. Her work as spy and smuggler over, Catherine had no real need to be fierce and fiery anymore, so she tempered herself once again—except on one occasion, when she encountered a miser who could only be broken with harsh words. Then the little beggar (who usually supplied the poor well by gentleness and patience in seeking alms) would shout and threaten, reminding her soon-to-be benefactor of the fate that awaits those who ignore the poor. Because of her decades of service, Catherine was respected by laity and clerics alike; one bishop visiting her town even insisted on receiving her blessing—the blessing of a laywoman—before he would consent to give her his.

To the day of her death at eighty-one, Catherine remained humble, despite the honors the world attempted to bestow on her. She only wanted to serve the Lord and his people, and she did that without conforming to anyone's expectations, even those of her pious neighbors. God had made Catherine strong and spirited, and she served him best by being exactly who she was. Through her intercession, may we all rejoice in whom God made us to be and not attempt to fit into some other mold. Bl. Catherine Jarrige, pray for us!

BL. NICOLAS STENO

*The Father of Geology, a Proto-Paleontologist,
a Convert, and a Bishop*



(1638–1686) ✱ Country: Denmark, Germany
Feast Day: December 5

For all the modern world's inclination to pit science and faith against each other, the dichotomy fails under scrutiny. Any number of scientific discoveries have been made by men and women of faith, and a good number of scientists have even been raised to the altar. Bl. Nicolas Steno's work was so important to the development of various sciences that NASA's website features a 3,700-word biography of the man.⁵ He is recognized as the father of geology whose work led to the fields of paleontology and crystallography and contributed significantly to the study of anatomy.

Born to a Lutheran family in Denmark in 1638, Steno had a rather tumultuous childhood. His father died when Steno was only six, and his mother, unable to care for him on her own, sent the little boy to be raised by relatives. When he was sixteen, a plague hit Copenhagen, killing a third of its population, including 240 students at Steno's school.

Perhaps this is what drew the multilingual polymath to his interest in medical science. Steno started university intending to study medicine, but he was unable to contain his curiosity. This multiplicity of interests frustrated the young scholar, who would have preferred to focus all his attention on one discipline. He even prayed to be freed from interest in other subjects, writing,

“I pray, thee, O God, take this plague from me and free my soul of all distraction, to work on one thing alone, and to make myself familiar with the tables of medicine alone.”⁶

Mercifully, that prayer went unanswered. Steno went on to do important work in anatomy; he discovered how the circulatory system works, how muscles contract, where saliva comes from (the eponymous Stensen duct), and that the heart is a muscle, among many, many other discoveries. But Steno didn't limit himself to physiological research. He also studied fossils, famously realizing that the tooth-shaped stones then believed to fall from the sky on moonless nights were, in fact, the fossilized teeth of prehistoric animals. This led to Steno's most significant contributions to science: the basic laws of stratigraphy (still in use today) that ultimately made it possible for scientists to understand which dinosaurs came from which eras and to determine the approximate age of the earth. This research earned him the moniker “the father of geology” and led ultimately to the entire field of paleontology.

All Steno's studies led him to a deeper love of God. He said of anatomy, “This is the true purpose of anatomy: to lead the audience by the wonderful artwork of the human body to the dignity of the soul and by the admirable structure of both to the knowledge and love of God.”⁷

But his travels through a post-Reformation Europe led Steno to question which was the true Church. He read the Church Fathers and found them a compelling argument for Catholicism, but it wasn't enough. It took an encounter with his eucharistic Lord for Nicolas Steno to be converted. Standing in an Italian town one day, he witnessed a eucharistic procession and saw the way the people fell on their knees before the Lord. As he watched, he knew that logically they were either bewitched by a lie from hell itself, or they were right. And if they were right, he had no choice but to worship alongside them. Having read John

6 and studied the writings of the Church Fathers, Steno knew which side he had to take. He became Catholic.

Steno continued working as a scientist for seven years after his conversion, making his crucial observations about the earth's strata in this period. But soon he felt the call to become a priest and was ordained in 1675. Brilliant Danish Catholics being in short supply at the time, he was asked to serve as bishop only two years later and was sent to northern Europe to work for the conversion of Danish, Norwegian, and German Protestants. Though still inclined to take time for research (studying the brain while serving as bishop), Bishop Steno left behind the accolades he had earned, honors afforded to him at every court in Europe, and lived a life of humility and poverty instead.

His time as bishop was marked not by wealth and leisure but by fasting and poverty, his episcopal ring sold so that he might feed the poor. He had no more stability than he'd had as a scientist, moving from one town to another attempting to witness to Protestants and serve Catholics in hostile areas. When he took sick, he was too far from any other clergy to receive the sacraments before he died at forty-eight, worn out from living radically for others.

Nicolas Steno was a genius who was unconcerned with accomplishments or renown. He sought truth in the lab, in the field, and in the Word of God. Through his intercession, may those who struggle with doubts be granted faith, shored up by reason. Bl. Nicolas Steno, pray for us!