

The nitty gritty of the saintly life

By [Allan R. Bevere](#)

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*Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker, a movement committed to providing a place for the homeless to sleep, to feeding the hungry, and to ending war, when told some were planning a campaign to have her made a saint is said to have responded, "You are not going to get rid of me that easily." Day's response, a quite understandable response, reflects the widespread assumption that saints are very, very holy people. That they are very, very holy people suggests, moreover, that saints rise above all conflict and controversy. (Stanley Hauerwas, [Without Apology: Sermons for Christ's Church](#), p. 23)*

What makes Christians saints is not that they are above it all, but that they in the middle of it all—working, serving, and ministering. Saints, just like the Lord they serve, are not afraid to get their hands dirty for the cause of the gospel, are not discouraged by the almost unmanageable need they see each day, and will not be influenced by those who find scandalous their willingness to associate with the kinds of people Jesus spent time with in his ministry. Saints are holy because they are worldly—that is, they engage themselves in the realm God in Jesus Christ has come to redeem.

I knew of a pastor who, years ago, decided to get out of the walls of the church and reach out to those who would not come into the walls of the building. He started having lunch once a week at the local bar, which was best described as a dive. He would wear a clerical collar so everyone would know he was clergy. Once a week he would have lunch and an iced tea and then sit at his table to work on his sermon.

The first time he went in, the place fell silent. No one knew what to make of him. But there he sat eating lunch and working away. The first few times he entered it was very silent. No one really spoke to him. Their discomfort was obvious. But over time, as he became a regular, the other regulars loosened up and they began to have conversations with the man they now nicknamed "Padre." As time went on the

regulars started to confide in him. One day as he sat there, one of the bartenders approached him and asked if she could talk to him. "Padre, I just don't what to do about my daughter. I need some advice." A couple of weeks later a regular started talking to him about his marriage and the difficulties he and his wife were having. Before too long, that pastor had developed a wonderful ministry just sitting and eating and working in a place where some "respectable" Christians would never think of entering.

At some point, after a few months, someone in the leadership in the church found out that his pastor was a regular at the local watering hole. He contacted others in the church and had a meeting. The pastor was told that it was unacceptable for their pastor to frequent such a place and associate with such people. His presence there was bringing disgrace to himself and the church. If he did not cease his current practice of eating there weekly, he would have to find another church to lead.

The saintly life is not equivalent to the respectable life. It is not about just hanging around with the people who, Jesus said, "do not need a physician" ([Luke 5:27-32](#)). The saintly life does not consist in just being nice, petting the neighbor's dog, and avoiding anything and anyone who might tarnish one's reputation at the local country club. The saintly life is the incarnational life, the life that reflects the God of the universe, who in Jesus Christ threw respectability out the window in order to hang out with the riff raff of humanity (which includes each and every one of us); and God is the loving father who swallowed his pride to welcome his son back home after his egregious and shameful behavior ([Luke 15:11-32](#)).

Saints are dangerous. They challenge any notion of discipleship as something that is easy and part time, any notion that following Jesus is just one more thing to be done in the midst of everything in the routine of the day—soccer games, music lessons, and the golf game. As Stanley Hauerwas rightly notes, "Often, it is non-Christians who best understand how threatening those we Christians identify as saints may be. Rome did not persecute and kill Christians for no reason" (*Without Apology*, p. 25).

We cannot get rid of our saints so easily, even in death. We remember them precisely because they instruct us how to reflect the image of Jesus Christ in the nitty gritty of the world, where Jesus wants to be through his people. The nitty gritty matters to Jesus and it should matter to Jesus' people too.

The opening lines of one of our great hymn is, "For all the saints, who from their labors rest." They are saints who now rest from their labors, not those who rested on their laurels.

And their saintly lives make our saintliness a possibility as well.

*Originally posted at [Bevere's blog](#)*