

Lives of the Saints, by Richard P. McBrien

reviewed by [Marcia Z. Nelson](#) in the [December 5, 2001](#) issue

There's somebody for everybody--an intention that cuts many ways--in this latest encyclopedic offering from eminent Notre Dame theologian and historian Richard P. McBrien, general editor of *The Encyclopedia of Catholicism*. This book aspires to cover the saintly waterfront. For students of Catholic theology and history, it provides the theological grounding for saintliness and the historic context for the evolving process of canonization within the Catholic Church, an institution that changes, however slowly, over time.

For lovers of the rich hagiographic tradition of the church, the book is full of short, vivid sketches of the saints whose lives--or deaths--are commemorated each day of the liturgical year. Calendars of non-Catholic Christian denominations are even referred to, giving the book something for ecumenists of various denominational stripes. For readers who want their Catholicism on the lite side, there are hagiographic factoids assembled in lists. (Polish-American Catholics will learn, for example, that Maria Faustina Kowalska is the first female saint from Poland.)

It isn't easy being encyclopedic--McBrien acknowledges the help of a cast of graduate assistants and peers--nor can it be easy for a leading Catholic liberal theologian to tackle one of the bulwarks of the church traditional: its pantheon of saints, who are associated with such uncontemporary behaviors as virginity, hermithood and self-flagellation. But like many other writers today finding fresh meaning in the lives and deaths of long-ago Christians, McBrien reviews traditional hagiography in order to draw contemporary lessons. He finds lived holiness expressed in a variety of modes and activities, a universal sanctity that binds the saintly "cloud of witnesses."

Saints' lives may yield the living waters of new interpretations for every age, but some of McBrien's conservative opponents may be hard-pressed to concede certain applications of this proposition. The author adds to his roll call of those who have

lived with heroic virtue (the Catholic working definition of saintliness) certain illustrious 20th-century figures who can be described as both heroic and virtuous, but by no stretch of the imagination as Catholics. Hence Hindu Gandhi, Baptist Martin Luther King Jr. and Lutheran Dag Hammarskjöld earn mentions in *Lives of the Saints*. So too does the as yet uncanonized Mother Teresa.

This kind of inclusiveness may simply be too much for very traditional Catholics. Pope John Paul II's record number of canonizations (451 as of June 2001, including three large groups of ethnic Asians martyred for their faith) enlarged and diversified the contemporary pool of saints. But unlike McBrien, the pope has held to the basic understanding that a Catholic saint must be Catholic. And while the ethnicity of the recently canonized groups of martyrs may be novel, their witness of martyrdom is as old as the church itself. Martyrdom has always been an ecclesial tape-cutter and powerful argument for admission to the saintly ranks.

No one can fault McBrien for not doing his homework. Footnotes, a timeline, glossary, bibliography, chart and parenthetical textual citations of everything from church dogma to biblical verses make the book almost formidably documented and organized. Best of all, however, it is readable. It acknowledges tradition while seeking to animate it, making the lives of saints a living, and challenging, legacy for believers.