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# The Saint of the Sock Drawer

## An Introduction

When I was nine, my greatest pleasure was ordering things through the mail. The cereal boxes that filled our kitchen shelves all boasted small order forms on the back, which I would clip out, fill in with my address and send away, along with a dollar bill or two. A few weeks later a brown paper package addressed to me would arrive in our mailbox. Nothing filled me with more excitement.

While the most attractive offers typically appeared in comic books, these advertisements rarely represented what the postman eventually delivered. The “Terrifying Flying Ghost” on the inside back cover of a *Spider-Man* comic book turned out to be a cheap plastic ball, a rubber band, and a piece of white tissue paper. The “Fake Vomit” looked nothing like the real stuff, and the “Monster Tarantula” was not monstrous at all.

Worst of all were the “Sea Monkeys.” The colorful advertisement depicted smiling aquatic figures (the largest one wearing a golden crown) happily cavorting in a sort of sea city. Unfortunately, my six-week wait for them had a disappointing end: the Sea Monkeys turned out to be a packet of shrimp eggs. And while the Sea Monkeys did eventually hatch in a fishbowl on a chair in my bedroom, they were so small as to be nearly invisible, and none, as far as I could tell, wore

a crown. (Sea Monkey City was nearly decimated when I accidentally sneezed on it during my annual winter cold.)

Other purchases were more successful. My Swimming Tony the Tiger toy, whose purchase required eating my way through several boxes of Sugar Frosted Flakes to earn sufficient box tops, amazed even my parents with his swimming skills. The orange and black plastic tiger had arms that rotated and legs that kicked maniacally, and he was able to churn his way through the choppy waters of the stopped-up kitchen sink. One day, Tony, fresh from a dip, slipped from my fingers and fell on the linoleum floor. Both of his arms fell off, marking the end of his short swimming career. I put the armless tiger in the fishbowl with the Sea Monkeys, who seemed not to mind the company.

But even with my predilection for mail-order purchases, I would be hard-pressed to explain what led me to focus my childish desires on a plastic statue of St. Jude that I had spied in a magazine. I can't imagine what magazine this might have been, since my parents weren't in the habit of leaving Catholic publications lying around the house, but apparently the photo of the statue was sufficiently appealing to convince me to drop \$3.50 into an envelope. That sum represented not only an excess of three weeks' allowance but also the forgoing of an *Archie* comic book—a real sacrifice at the time.

It certainly wasn't any interest on the part of my family, or any knowledge about St. Jude, that drew me to his statue. I knew nothing about him, other than what the magazine ad told me: he was the patron saint of hopeless causes. Even if I had been interested in reading about him, there would have been little to read; for all his current popularity, Jude remains a mysterious figure. Though he is named as one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, there are only three brief mentions of Jude in the entire New Testament. In fact,

two lists of the apostles don't include him at all. Instead they mention a certain "Thaddeus," giving rise to the name "St. Jude Thaddeus." To confuse matters more, there is also a Jude listed as the brother of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. And though some ancient legends mention his work in Mesopotamia, the *Encyclopedia of Catholicism* says candidly, "We have no reliable information about this obscure figure."

But Jude's story didn't concern me. What appealed to me most was that he was patron of hopeless causes. Who knew what help someone like that could give me? A tiger that could swim in the kitchen sink was one thing, but a saint who could help me get what I wanted was quite another. It was worth at least \$3.50.

In a few weeks, I received a little package containing a nine-inch beige plastic statue, along with a booklet of prayers to be used for praying to my new patron. St. Jude the Beige, who held a staff and carried a sort of plate emblazoned with the image of a face (which I supposed was Jesus, though this was difficult to discern), was immediately given pride of place on top of the dresser in my bedroom.

At the time, I prayed to God only intermittently, and then mainly to ask for things, such as: "Please let me get an A on my next test." "Please let me do well in Little League this year." "Please let my skin clear up for the school picture." I used to envision God as the Great Problem Solver, the one who would fix everything if I just prayed hard enough, used the correct prayers, and prayed in precisely the right way. But when God couldn't fix things (which seemed more frequent than I would have liked), I would turn to St. Jude. I figured that if it was beyond the capacity of God to do something, then *surely* it must be a lost cause, and it was time to call on St. Jude.

Fortunately, the booklet that accompanied the St. Jude statue included plenty of good prayers and even featured one in Latin that

began “Tantum ergo sacramentum . . .” I saved the Latin prayer for the most important hopeless causes—final exams and the like. When I *really* wanted something, I would say the “Tantum ergo sacramentum” prayer three times on my knees.

St. Jude stood patiently atop my dresser until high school. My high school friends, when visiting my house, often asked to see my bedroom (we were all inordinately curious about what each other’s bedroom looked like). And though I was by now fond of St. Jude, I was afraid of what my friends would think if they spotted the strange plastic statue standing on my dresser. So St. Jude was relegated to inside my sock drawer and brought out only on special occasions.

My faith was another thing, you could say, that was relegated to the sock drawer for the next several years. During high school, I made it to Mass more or less weekly; but later, in college, I became just an occasional churchgoer (though I still prayed to the Great Problem Solver). And as my faith grew thinner and thinner, my affinity for St. Jude began to seem a little childish: silly, superstitious, and faintly embarrassing.

That changed for me at age twenty-six. Dissatisfied with my life in the business world, I began to consider doing something else, though at the time I had little idea of what that something else would be. All I knew was that after five years in corporate America, I was miserable and wanted out. From that rather banal sentiment, however, God was able to work. The Great Problem Solver was at work on a problem that I only dimly comprehended. In time, God would give me an answer to a question that I hadn’t even asked.

One evening, after a long day’s work, I came home and flipped on the television set. The local PBS station was airing a documentary about a Catholic priest named Thomas Merton. Though I had never heard of Merton, all sorts of famous talking heads appeared on-screen

to testify to his enormous influence on their lives. In just a few minutes of watching the program I got the idea that Thomas Merton was bright, funny, holy, and altogether unique. The documentary was so interesting that it prompted me to track down, purchase, and read his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which told the story of his journey from an aimless youth to a Trappist monk. It captivated me as few books ever have.

Over the next two years, whenever I thought seriously about the future, the only thing that seemed to make any sense was entering a religious order. There were, of course, some doubts, some false starts, some hesitations, and some worries about embarrassing myself, but eventually I decided to quit my job and, at age twenty-eight, enter the Society of Jesus, the religious order more commonly known as the Jesuits. It was certainly the best decision I've ever made.

Upon entering the Jesuit novitiate, I was surprised to learn that most of my fellow novices had strong “devotions,” as they called them, to one or another saint. They spoke with obvious affection for their favorite saints—almost as if they knew them personally. One novice, for example, was especially fond of Dorothy Day, quoting her liberally during our weekly community meetings. Another talked a great deal about St. Thérèse of Lisieux. But though my brother novices were sincere in their devotions, and they patiently related the lives of their heroes and heroines to me, I now found the idea of praying to the saints wholly superstitious. What was the point? If God hears your prayers, why do you need the saints?

These questions were answered when I discovered the collection of saints' biographies that filled the creaky wooden bookcases in the novitiate library.

I pulled my first selection from the shelves as a result of some serious prompting from one novice: “You've got to read *The Story of*

*a Soul*,” he kept telling me (badgering me was more like it). “Then you’ll understand why I like Thérèse so much.”

At this point, I knew little about the “Little Flower,” as she is known, and imagined Thérèse of Lisieux as a sort of shrinking violet: timid, skittish, and dull. So I was astonished when her autobiography revealed instead a lively, intelligent, and strong-willed woman, someone I might like to have known. Reading her story led me to track down biographies of other saints—some well known, some obscure—in our library: St. Stanislaus Kostka, who, despite vigorous protests from his family, walked 450 miles to enter the Jesuit novitiate. St. Thomas More, whose fine intellect and love of country did not blind him to the centrality of God in his life. St. Teresa of Ávila, who decided, to the surprise of most and the dismay of many, to overhaul her Carmelite Order. And Pope John XXIII, who, I was happy to discover, was not only compassionate and innovative but also witty.

Gradually I found myself growing fonder of these saints and developing a tenderness toward them. I began to see them as models of holiness relevant to contemporary believers, and to understand the remarkable ways that God works in the lives of individuals. Each saint was holy in his or her unique way, revealing how God celebrates individuality. As C. S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*: “How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been: how gloriously different are the saints.”

This gave me enormous consolation, for I realized that none of us are meant to be Thérèse of Lisieux or Pope John XXIII or Thomas More. We’re meant to be ourselves, and meant to allow God to work in and through our own individuality, our own humanity. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, grace builds on nature.

Moreover, I found companions among the saints—friends to turn to when I needed a helping hand. My novice director told me that he thought of the saints as older brothers and sisters to whom one could look for advice and counsel. The Catholic theologian Lawrence S. Cunningham, in his book *The Meaning of Saints*, suggests that the saints also serve as our “prophetic witnesses,” spurring us to live more fully as Christian disciples. Of course some might argue (and some do argue) that all you need is Jesus. And that’s true: Jesus is everything, and the saints understood this more than anyone.

But God in his wisdom has also given us these companions of Jesus to accompany us along the way, so why not accept the gift of their friendship and encouragement? And there’s no reason to feel as if devotion to the saints somehow takes away from your devotion to Jesus: everything the saints say and do is centered on Christ and points us in his direction. One day at Mass in the novitiate chapel, I heard—as if for the first time—a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the saints: “You renew the Church in every age by raising up men and women outstanding in holiness, living witnesses of your unchanging love. They inspire us by their heroic lives, and help us by their constant prayers to be the living sign of your saving power.”

And I thought, *Yes*.

In reading the lives of the saints, I also discovered that I could easily recognize myself, or at least parts of myself, in their stories. This was the aspect of their lives that I most appreciated: they had struggled with the same human foibles that everyone does. Knowing this, in turn, encouraged me to pray to them for help during particular times and for particular needs. I knew that Thomas Merton had struggled greatly with pride and egotism, so when combating the same I would pray for his intercession. When sick I would pray to

Thérèse of Lisieux; she understood what it was to battle self-pity and boredom during an illness. For courage, I prayed to Joan of Arc. For compassion, to Aloysius Gonzaga. For a better sense of humor and an appreciation of the absurdities of life, to Pope John XXIII.

Quite by surprise, then, I went from someone embarrassed by my affection for the saints to someone who counted it as one of the joys of my life. Even after the novitiate, as my Jesuit training continued, I read about the saints and took special pleasure in meeting new ones. You can never have too many friends.

Now I find myself introducing others to favorite saints and, likewise, being introduced. It's funny—the way you discover a new saint is often similar to the way in which you meet a new friend. Maybe you hear an admiring comment about someone and think, *I'd like to get to know that person*, such as when I started reading about English Catholic history and knew that I wanted to meet Thomas More. Perhaps you're introduced to a person by someone else who knows you'll enjoy that person's company, just as that novice introduced me to Thérèse. Or perhaps you run across someone, totally by accident, during your day-to-day life. It wasn't until my philosophy studies as a Jesuit that I read St. Augustine's *Confessions* and fell in love with his writings and his way of speaking of God.

That's what this book is: a personal introduction to some of my favorite saints, holy persons, and companions. (Technically, a "saint" is someone who has been canonized, or officially recognized by the church as a person who has lived a holy life, enjoys life in heaven with God, and is worthy of public veneration by the faithful.) Over the past few years, whenever I've felt particularly close to a saint, I've spent some time writing down what drew me to him or her. Some of these essays reflect a devotion based on the public actions and well-known writings of a saint; others are rooted in a more personal response to a

hidden part of a saint's life—a small, almost unnoticed, piece of his or her story that has affected me in a deep way.

This memoir is organized chronologically, so that the saints are introduced more or less in the sequence in which I first encountered them. In this way, I hope that you might be able to follow the progress of my own spiritual journey as you read about their lives. But a single chapter may range over years and even decades. For example, I first met St. Bernadette when I was a Jesuit novice, but it wasn't until some fifteen years later that I made a pilgrimage to Lourdes, where I came to know her story more intimately.

These reflections are not meant to be exhaustive, scholarly biographies of the lives of these spiritual heroes and heroines. Instead, they are meditations on the way that one Christian relates to these holy persons: how I came to know them, what inspires me about their stories, and what they've meant to me in my own life.

At the beginning of this essay, I said that I wasn't sure what led me to my affinity to St. Jude. But as I think about it, I know it was God who did so. God works in some very weird ways, and moving a boy to begin a life of devotion to the saints through a magazine advertisement is just one of them. Yet grace is grace, and when I look back over my life, I give thanks that I've met so many wonderful saints—who pray for me, offer me comfort, give me examples of discipleship, and help me along the way.

All of this, I like to think, is thanks to St. Jude. For all those years stuck inside the sock drawer, he prayed for a boy who didn't even know that he was being prayed for.