For Personal Reflection

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1. Who are the saints to whom I look for guidance or encouragement?
2. How do these saints speak to me?
3. What lessons do they teach me?
4. In which virtues did the saints exceed or grow?
5. What were the sins or failings with which they struggled?
6. What do their struggles say about my own sins, weaknesses or failings?
7. How can I be consoled by their setbacks?
8. How can I be challenged by their success?

Further Reading

Treatise on the Love of God (Book X, Chapter 9)

Spiritual Conferences, (Number IV, page 63)

Pulpit and Pew. A Study in Salesian Preaching. Arthur Kerns, MSFS: 1976. pp 256—258.

De Sales

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Saints...

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

For Sinners

The saints are heroes of our faith tradition. They are men, women and children who convincingly demonstrate in their own lives the transforming, redeeming and inspiring love of God. They are people who challenge us, through words and works, to make use of that same transforming, redeeming and inspiring love of God in our own lives.

In short, they are people to whom we look up; they are people we admire. They remind us God can accomplish in us the kinds of things God accomplished in them.

But the stories of the saints are more than a consideration of the promise of human strength, courage, fidelity and tenacity. Their stories are also powerful reminders of the reality of human frailty, weakness and infidelity.

"We study the virtues of the saints in order to imitate them; we study the failings of the saints in order to avoid them."

In a sermon he preached on Palm Sunday, March 1622, Francis de Sales observed: "All creatures, you see, are a mixture of perfection and imperfection. For this reason, they can be used as symbols of either. Every person, no matter how holy, has some imperfections. Made in God's image, each person reflects something of God's goodness while, at the same time, that same person carries some imperfections." (Pulpit and Pew)

To overlook the vices of the saints is, paradoxically, to run the risk of diminishing their virtues.

"St. Peter was chosen to be the chief of the apostles, although he was subject to so many imperfections…"

St. Francis preached: "We do no harm to the saints by pointing out their failings and their sins as well as their virtues. In fact, biographers do a tremendous disservice to them by hiding or drawing a veil over the early part of their lives for fear of lowering our opinion of their sanctity. This is a great mistake, an injustice to the saints and all who follow them." (*Ibid*)

Francis de Sales obviously believed that we have as much to learn from the setbacks of the saints as we do from their successes. "It is a good thing to see the defects in the lives of the saints. It not only shows God's goodness in forgiving them, but it also teaches us to imitate the saints in their efforts to overcome their failings and to do penance for them. We study the virtues of the saints in order to imitate them; we study the failings of the saints in order to avoid them." (*Ibid*)

Consider the example of Saint Peter. Of Peter, Francis wrote: "St. Peter was chosen to be the chief of the apostles, although he was subject to so many imperfections that he even committed some after receiving the Holy Spirit. Still, notwithstanding his defects, he was always full of courage, never allowing himself to be dismayed by his shortcomings." (Conferences, Number IV, page 63)

In the Treatise, Francis commented: "Who would not marvel at the heart of St. Peter, so bold among armed soldiers that he alone takes his sword in hand and strikes out with it? Yet, just a short time later, among unarmed people, he is so cowardly that at the mere word of a servant girl he denies and detests his master." (Treatise, Book X, Chapter 9)

This way of looking at the saints can be most helpful in our everyday attempts to "Live Jesus". Seeing the defects of the saints can serve as a strong vaccine against any dismay or discouragement we may experience when faced with our own sins, failings and imperfections. At the same time, seeing the virtues of the saints can dissuade us from becoming smug or satisfied with our shortcomings.

"It is a good thing to see the defects in the lives of the saints."

Bottom line? The saints are companions for the journey. They have much to teach us about how to pursue a life of devotion: overcoming our sins and failings, strengthening our practice of virtue. Francis de Sales (himself a saint) challenges us to see the saints as real people, and to realize that we can learn from their tragedies as well as from their triumphs.