

Saints are intense. Do I have to be that intense?

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Q: I read about the saints and how extraordinary they were. Some of them did really hard things like only getting a few hours of sleep and doing other painful things. I guess not all of them did outstanding things, but I feel like in order to become a saint I have to do something like not sleep for days or do penance all of the time. How can I be holy?

A: This is a great question. One of the reasons why it is so great is because it goes to the very heart of what it means to be holy. I once read a book written by a Benedictine monk named Dom Hubert Von Zellar in which he addresses this problem head on. He writes, "If personal holiness is thought of as being a name at the top of the list it is understood wrong. If it is thought of as something which merits a feast in the Church's calendar it is understood wrong. If it is thought of as something to which is attached the power of working miracles it is understood wrong. If it is thought of as a mooning about in the state of pious contentment (or sweet ecstasy or noble and aloof virtue) it is understood wrong. There is nothing "superior,"...about it."

So what is holiness? How can a person live a holy life in the midst of a culture that doesn't seem to value holiness (or even pay much attention to God)?

Doing the will of God. Belief that has been translated into action, this is what faith really is. And this is what holiness really is.

Father Michael Gaitley pointed out that Saint Maximilian Kolbe would teach young Franciscan brothers about holiness using this formula: $w = W = H$ (where our will conforms to God's Will, there is Holiness).

I think that it might be helpful to remember that many people fall from this center line into one of two erroneous extremes. The first is that God wants nothing more than for us to be happy. While God is good and wants us to share in His goodness and joy (you are made for love!), that doesn't mean that the point of life is one's personal happiness. If "happiness" simply means "getting what I want", then it is definitely not the point of life. Once again, the point is conforming our will to God's Will at every moment.

The other wrongheaded extreme is the notion that "the holy thing to do is whatever I least want to do". I find this kind of thinking all of the time when speaking with young people trying to discern God's vocation for their life. A young man or young woman wants to be a saint. They have absolutely no attraction or desire for the priesthood or religious life...but this antipathy leads them to conclude that the "holier" thing to do would be to pursue seminary or enter a convent. When they just can't bring themselves to do this, they believe that it reveals a lack of holiness on their part, and thereby disqualifies them from being a saint.

When a person is living in the present moment, and is attentive to the reality that God is in that moment, then they are living a life of sanctity.

This kind of thinking often stems from a lack of knowledge of who God is. It rises out of a certain perspective and many people's personal experience. For example, there is a certain kind of theology that over-emphasizes our fallen humanity and tends to conclude that every natural desire a person has needs to be rejected and suppressed. But authentic Catholic anthropology is more nuanced. Human beings are essentially good, but we also have an inclination or attraction to sin. Because of that inclination, we have to be aware (and even on guard) for where our desires conflict with God's Will. But because of the intrinsic goodness human beings retain, we are also "hard-wired" for the Good.

So how does one know God's will? Simple.

Start with what you know. I cannot over-emphasize this. Too many times, people try to base their next step in the spiritual life off of an unknown factor. "What does God want me to do with my life???" Please...please start with what you already know. You already know that God will not call you to violate His Word, His Church, or a solemn oath that you have previously made (like marriage vows or a religious profession). You already know that you

need to observe the Ten Commandments and the Five Precepts of the Church. You already know that you need to be as attentive as possible to the Great Commandment of loving God with everything and loving your neighbor as yourself. (Spoiler alert: loving God with everything means that you are setting some time aside every day to be with Him.)

These things are obvious. Start with that.

The next thing to keep in mind is just as simple: being attentive to the task at hand. Saints (real saints, not the kinds of “saints” we may have made up in our minds) are attentive to the present moment. Whether that moment involves prayer, serving another person, or enjoying a meal or song or exercise...holiness involves living in the moment (this is very different than living for the moment).

When a person is living in the present moment, and is attentive to the reality that God is in that moment, then they are living a life of sanctity. This is what Saint Paul was referring to when he wrote, “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Living this way is what Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection called “the practice of the Presence of God”. It is living out of a real relationship with God, knowing that He is attentive to you and present at every moment. Living this way is the recipe for authentic holiness.

Dom Hubert van Zellar put it this way: “ The way to think of sanctity is something which, by being generous and faithful to grace, gives back to God of love which he is given to the soul. So it is for God’s sake, rather than for our own, that we should want to be saints.”