

Millions of unknown saints

“Even Lucifer might well have a change of heart,” said the fifth grader. “Isn’t that right, Father?”

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [September 14, 2016](#) issue



Monument of the Fallen Angel in Parque del Retiro, Madrid, Spain. [Some rights reserved](#) by [losmininos](#).

One day when I was in grade school at Our Lady of Perpetual Social Awkwardness there was a snap quiz, sort of, when our stern pastor suddenly visited our class and asked us about the saints for whom we were named.

Inasmuch as this was a Catholic school, and almost all of us were Irish Catholic or Italian Catholic, nearly all of us were indeed named for saints, as was the Catholic custom long ago in many countries around the world. Indeed nearly all the girls in class had Mary in their names somehow, either as a first name or a middle name, or they had a version of Mary’s name as their first or second names (Maureen, Moira, Maria), or they were named for Mary’s cousin Elizabeth or her mother Anne; one girl,

MaryAnne Elizabeth, was named for all three, which we assumed meant she had no choice in life but to be a nun, though she was a brawler of a girl.

The good sweet Lord alone knows what the pastor was thinking when he stepped into our classroom abruptly and began to pepper us with questions about our names; perhaps he thought it a great chance for hagiographic education, or he had wanted to pop in on the teacher and see if she was teaching what she was supposed to be teaching, or maybe he was just a little lonely and frazzled and needed some of the fizz and burble of a fifth-grade classroom. But he had caught us by surprise, and we were a little afraid of him anyway, given his authority and uniform, and very few of us were able to speak cogently of the saints for whom we were named. In my case the situation was even more awkward, for I had not been named for a saint, but for the last high king of Ireland, Brian Boru. I explained this to the pastor when my turn came, and to his credit he smiled, and said that he had the utmost respect for my parents, pillars and stalwarts of the parish, and anyway there had been a Blessed Brian, who had been given the gift of martyrdom, in the year 1591, when Catholics were hunted down and slain in the streets of London, so this means, of course, Brian, that there's an open slot for a St. Brian, and perhaps, if you work hard, you will someday be a saint.

Yes, Father.

And on he went to the next child, and the next, and the next, and most of us stammered and stumbled and hoped he would grow bored and leave, and the teacher stood there patiently, and then he came to a boy named Luke. Now, Luke was a poor student in every subject except history, which he loved with a fervid absorption that often startled even the teacher; he was by far the best history student in the class, and the teacher, to her credit, often let him do projects of his own device rather than force him to plod through lessons she knew he knew. He was also a garrulous youth, chattering and rattling off lists and facts and names and dates at the slightest conversational opening. So when Father got to him, and asked him about his saint, off went Luke on a remarkable speech, which started with the Evangelist, and then discussed the Synoptic Gospels, and the Gnostic Gospels, and the manner by which saints are recognized, and the indisputable fact that there are millions of unrecognized saints, as the church itself acknowledges via All Saints Day, which celebrates not just canonically recognized saints but all saints, which is to say the millions or even perhaps billions of unknown saints, isn't that right, Father? And if there are so very many we do not yet know and may never know, then it's entirely

possible that some of them may well be men and women and children we never before considered as saints, for example St. Judas or St. Zacchaeus, or the daughter of the woman from Syrophenicia, or the woman from Syrophenicia herself, isn't that right, Father? And if we extend this line of inquiry to its logical conclusion, it's quite possible that even Lucifer became or will become a saint, because who knows the miraculous ways of the Lord, and anything is possible in the Lord, and even Lucifer might well have a change of heart, and become again the Bringer of Light, for that is what his name is in Hebrew, isn't that right, Father? So there certainly could be a St. Lucifer?

And Father, to his credit, smiled, after he finished getting his jaw back up to his face from down around his belly button, and he said, quite seriously and even, I think, respectfully, and even reverently, Why, yes, Luke, that could certainly be, although I have to say that I have never contemplated the idea before. Anything and everything is possible in the grace of the Lord, and anyone who ever tells you that something is impossible in the Lord, that person is a fool. You remember that. All of you should remember that. I should be getting back to the rectory. My thanks for a most illuminating afternoon. St. Lucifer—I will have to think that one over for a while, Luke. Quite a while. Thank you.

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