

Protestant sainthood

By [Martin B. Copenhaver](#)

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We Protestants need more saints. The Roman Catholics have more than 10,000 canonized saints. By my count, we Protestants have as few as five.

I don't mean "saint" in the Pauline sense, a term that includes all of the people of God. Rather, I think we need more saints, those particular individuals of faith about whom the church says, "Pay attention to these lives. Take inspiration from them. Try, as you are able, to follow their example."

The author of Hebrews was writing to a small band of new Christians who were suffering persecution and feeling isolated in their struggles. In the great 11th chapter, he points to various people in salvation history who were able to face every manner of challenge and hardship because they had faith. The author says, in essence, "You are not alone in this. Look to Abraham. Look to Moses. Look to David and Samuel and others so that you, too, might rise to the challenges that face you through faith."

Having such examples of faith can be both instructive and inspiring. It is through saints that we can see faithfulness embodied. We see what it looks like in a human life.

I envy the Roman Catholics their saints because they have many people of history to whom they can point. To be sure, there are some who are rather quirky (St. Neot did his daily devotions while neck deep in a well and thus became the patron saint of fish) and others whose qualifications for sainthood seem rather thin (the chief accomplishment of Simeon of Stylites seems to have been sitting on a pillar for decades at a time), but the sheer variety of saints in the Roman Catholic tradition stretches the imagination to encompass the multitude of ways one can serve God and manifest the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes it seems we Protestants have only a small handful of people to point to, those whose lives reflect God's glory. Their names—Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer—are invoked with numbing regularity, whenever the preacher needs an illustration of faithfulness. Of course these individuals are great examples of faith. They are saints, to be sure.

But when their names are invoked so often, and other examples drawn upon so seldom, it does not stretch the imagination but rather constricts it. My hunch is that people in congregations have quit listening to what is said about these great individuals—either they've heard it too often or the heroism of these lives is so rare that no congregant can hope to reflect anything like it in his own life. Let's give these saints at least a rest and recognize some others, so that the gospel in all of its dimensions can be heard more fully again.

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