



Kateri Tekakwitha
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PRACTICAL HAGIOGRAPHY

A TOOL FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

BY STEPHEN NAKROSIS

From the earliest days of the Church, the tales of holy men and women served to inspire and strengthen the people of God. The Acts of the Apostles record the actions of the early missionaries and martyrs, and the chronicles of the Church are full of stories of the martyrs of Rome and the Desert Fathers, of holy virgins and the Fathers of the Church. Today, their stories and the stories of thousands of saints who lived throughout history serve the same purpose. The New Evangelization offers fertile ground where these stories can serve to sow the seeds which may blossom into great gifts for those who hear.

A view of the literature shows that the vast majority of hagiography is concerned with the study of tales already written, with the sources used by past writers, and with the way in which the writers' social, cultural, and historical milieus influenced what they said and how they said it.

Less studied has been the manner in which new hagiographies should be composed. This article hopes to offer some ideas and propose some guidelines which may serve to assist those who are writing hagiographical works today about both those holy men and women who lived in the distant past and those who were more contemporary.



Not just history, and more than biography, hagiography contains elements of both disciplines. It is history written for a specific purpose. It is biography aimed towards a specific end. The goal of the hagiographer is to study and relate the lives of the saints, to keep alive their memory, and to do so in a manner which will inspire their audience, whether believers or no, to see that it is possible—indeed, desirable—to strive to live a life of heroic virtue. It is the story of a life told in the spirit of St. John the Evangelist, who wrote, “He who saw this has testified so that you may also believe. His testimony is true and he knows he tells the truth” (Jn 19:35). The story should be told in such a way that the listener will come to believe and, in believing, come closer to the goal of eternal life.

The call to holiness, as the Church teaches, is universal. It is for all men and women to aspire to lead a holy life. It is, indeed, the very purpose for which God created us. To help us to achieve this goal is the mission of the Church.

The Church’s mission is meaningless if it does not lead to holiness, which is human life lived in union with Christ. . . . The most obvious result of this activity of the Church and of her fidelity to the mission she has received from Christ are precisely the saints and the blessed. They testify to her work, they are the most beautiful fruits of evangelization and of the sacramental ministry.¹

To aid the faithful, and to draw those outside closer to the truth, to instruct and to inspire, the Church turns to the saints. They offer God’s people a challenge. They stand as a reminder of what we should be, of what God created us to be and calls us to be.

The faithful have always looked to the saints for both intercession and inspiration. In Europe during the Middle Ages, there was the tradition of the Fourteen Heavenly Helpers.² These particular saints were called

upon to intercede in all manner of earthly events, but especially in the case of illness. Given the state of medicine at the time, “the most effective medical treatment available . . . was probably a visit to a saint’s shrine. Miracles aside, ‘the placebo effect’ can be just as easily activated by religious faith as by a doctor’s bedside manner.”³ Today, viewed in the context of the New Evangelization, the saints are looked to less as intercessors (although their intercession is still sought), and more as models to follow in order to live a life of virtue. In 2012, the Synod of Bishops wrote, “The universal call to holiness is constitutive of the New Evangelization that sees the saints as effective models of the variety and forms in which this vocation can be realized.”⁴

Pope St. John Paul II canonized more saints in more places than any of his predecessors. He wanted heroes to inspire the faithful from all parts of the world and from all walks of life. He made a conscious effort to greatly expand the rolls of those canonized by the Church. He went to great lengths to find men and women, married or single, religious or lay, who were worthy of the great honor. On his frequent trips across the globe, he would make a gift to his hosts, announcing that a local would be proclaimed blessed or be canonized as a saint.

In the context of the New Evangelization, [Pope John Paul II] also wants to evangelize by means of the saints and blessed, that is, by means of Christians who lived the faith and the Gospel both heroically and radically. They are “Gospel figures,” “true Christians” to whom we should refer for the New Evangelization. . . . The saints, furthermore, enable us to see how Christ continues to make Himself present to the world, and how his Gospel is extending in time and space. They are valuable examples for the Church: blessed and saints show us the practical ways to holiness.⁵

The job, then, for those who write about saints, is to present who these people were and how they lived to their audience—to bring to life for the reader their “practical way to holiness.”

This aspect of hagiography, this “practical hagiography,” is different from the study of past works and their sources. “Scientific hagiography” studies the work of practical hagiography to determine as best as possible what are the most reliable sources and what we can know for certain about the holy men and women who went before us. The practical hagiographer tries, by retelling the lives and works of these holy men and women, to bring readers to a place where they can believe and begin to emulate the saints of the past. Hagiography encompasses the disciplines of history and biography, but it also includes theology. And while hagiographers attempt to tell the story of a saint’s life, they are not concerned with the same elements of the tale as would interest a conventional biographer.

What is of interest to hagiographers is that their subjects chose to follow God, to dedicate their lives to loving their Creator. Hagiography explores the manner in which that decision affected the saints’ lives and the way in which they lived this love of God. According to Donald Nicholl,

Anyone who has read many medieval lives of the saints will have been struck by the fact that these accounts of holy people follow a regular pattern, according to which there are two supreme moments in every person’s life. The first is the moment of turning, or conversion (which is, after all, only another word for turning) . . . and the second is the act of dying. Clearly, the two are so essentially connected in the minds of the writers as to be virtually one act: the manner of a person’s death is the measure of how sincerely and utterly that person turns towards the light at the moment of conversion.⁶

It is difficult to determine what, exactly, leads to an individual’s conversion. In some cases, like that of St. Paul, there is a dramatic moment, a blinding light on the road to Damascus, which marks a turning point in a life. For others, the process of conversion is slower, more subtle. It is a gradual process, where one turns slowly, but more and more, toward one’s Creator, until the person reaches a point where he or she can do no more than live for God.⁷ As Pope Francis stated in a 2013 address:

The prophet Ezekiel said: “I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” This is the experience of the Apostle Paul after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. It radically changed his outlook on life and he received Baptism. God transformed his heart! However, only think: a persecutor, a man who hounded out the Church and Christians, became a saint, a Christian to the marrow, a genuine Christian! First he was a violent persecutor, then he became an Apostle, a witness of Jesus Christ so brave that he was not afraid of suffering martyrdom. In the end, the soul who wanted to kill those who proclaimed the gospel gave his own life to proclaim it.⁸

The grace of God goes where it will and works as it will. It does its work according to the will of him who sent it and remains a mystery to mankind. It also gives to the hagiographer a ready answer to a question any biographer will ask: Why did a saint choose to become a saint? A conventional biographer might dwell on his subject’s childhood, on family history, or perhaps attempt to turn to psychological or social motivations to explain the causes of someone’s conversion. For the hagiographer, the question of “why?” is less important than the question of “what?”

Through love of God, and through his grace, the saints come to a place where they can do nothing else. This is the common experience throughout the centuries that cannot be explained by conventional biography. The saints, no matter what the circumstances of their birth, no matter their culture, their status, their education, all shared in this common gift of grace. Twenty centuries separate the Apostles from St. Maximilian Kolbe, but both were given the same gift. Separated by 2,000 years, and by the vast differences in education and lifestyle and technology spawned over that time, still they shared this common experience—timeless and eternal, yet ever fresh in each saint’s life.

The moment of conversion is important. More important still is what happened after, how the saints spent the rest of their lives living their faith. The Apostles, quite literally, answered the call of Jesus when he called them to follow him: “Immediately, they left the boat and their father and followed him” (Mt 4:22). St. Maximilian Kolbe, St. Edith Stein, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and all the other saints honored by the Church did the same thing. When they heard his voice, they answered. The experiences of their lives, even 2,000 years apart, led them to a similar conclusion and a similar end. The power of God’s Word transcends national borders, economic divides, and cultural differences. It is as appealing now as it was 2,000 years ago, or in the Middle Ages, or even in the last century.

This is the common thread which runs through the lives of all the saints: the presence of God in their hearts and in their minds, and the desire to love God and do his will. God is always with them, always in their thoughts. They are aware of his presence at all times and in all things. But even as the experience of conversion is universal to the saint, it is equally a deeply personal mystery, fully unknowable to anyone but God. This mystery extends even to the converted, who may have been influenced in ways unknown to themselves. It

would be impossible for anyone to look at one of God’s saints and say, “This event, this act, and this incident led him to his conversion.” As G.K. Chesterton wrote in his biography of St. Francis, “The only difficulty about doing the thing in this way is it cannot be done. It would really require a saint to write the life of a saint.”⁹

Instead of asking *why*, then, the hagiographer should show *what* happened after the conversion. How did the saint live? What did she do and say? How did her life reflect the fact that, having encountered the living God, the saint decided to embrace and follow him, at the expense of all other things? These milestones in a saint’s journey of faith must be shown in such a way as to inspire admiration. From admiration will come imitation. From imitation one will come, with the aid of God, to understanding. The inspiration these stories spark can lead us to follow in the footsteps of the saints and answer with an eternal “yes” when called to follow Christ.

There are pitfalls to be avoided. One of the most serious is overly emphasizing the virtues of the subject, stripping him or her of any human tendency that might not reflect the ideal of saint. If a hagiographer ignores every flaw and erases every blemish, if she ignores all the human failings of her subject, she does a disservice to both her subject and to her audience. By setting the bar so high, by making the saint seem superhuman or other than human, instead of truly human, the hagiographer makes it impossible for the reader to ever hope to emulate the saint.

When we study the saints, and when we relay their stories to others, we must make clear we are not dealing with ideologies or ideals, concepts or theory. We are dealing with a created being, made in God’s image and intended for eternal bliss in heaven if his will be done, but as flawed as all humans.

To cite just one example, consider the life story of St. Dominic Savio. Unlike most other young saints, Dominic, who was fifteen when he died, was not a martyr. But he possessed a great moral genius and was canonized for his piety, his prayerfulness, and for his total devotion to Jesus and to the Blessed Mother. Nevertheless, his story could be told in such a manner as to make him seem less like a teenaged boy and more like a nag, a prude, a holier-than-thou prig who never had a lick of fun. Many of the books about him relate how he rose early to attend Mass, and how he would often kneel before the doors of the Church until the priest came by to unlock them. He attended confession so often, we are told, that he was scolded by the priests to stay away. These are hardly qualities that would endear an adolescent boy to his peers, then or now.

And still, St. Dominic Savio, just plain Dominic while he lived at St. John Bosco's home for boys, was well-liked and respected by his fellow students and by the groups of rough orphans who also lived in the home. Surely his life must have consisted of more than prayer and frequent confession. He was brave enough to stand between two larger, older boys who were about to engage in a rock fight. Brandishing a crucifix, he told the combatants that before they could fight, they would have to stone him. The two boys were unwilling to continue and settled their feud. The fact that they could be swayed by the younger boy demonstrates that Dominic was well-liked enough to influence their behavior. If he was as priggish as some stories would make him seem, he would have probably been made the target of a few stones before the boys turned their attention back to each other. On another occasion, Dominic scolded some classmates who were looking at pornography. Again, a younger boy telling his older classmates to throw away pornographic literature and warning them of the peril to their souls would probably not be countenanced unless the younger child was liked

and respected. There must have been something to St. Dominic's personality besides his prayerfulness and devotion to engender this respect. He couldn't have been overly prudish or judgmental or a prig. He was another boy, in a school full of boys, but a boy of such faith that he could honestly say, "I would rather die than commit a sin."¹⁰

When someone mentions the word "saint," many people think of the statues in church, or of rosy-cheeked, dewy-eyed figures on holy cards. They don't think of them as human, but as some other species with whom there is nothing in common. Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, recognized this. She was extolled, during her life and after, as a model of virtue. In her writing, and in conversations with friends, she decried the idea that people thought her a saint. She feared that if she was acknowledged as such, it would give people an excuse not to follow her example of charity and service.



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The challenge, then, is to portray the lives of the saints in such a manner that they come across as men and women who faced the same challenges, tests, and temptations as men and women faced throughout the centuries and which they still face today. At the same time, the reader must know that the saints experienced the same joys, endured the same inconveniences, dealt with the same jerks, laughed at jokes, endured boredom, ate, slept, bathed, and lived their lives. The idea that a saint could sin, and that every saint committed sin, strikes many as incongruous if not outright wrong. If they were sinners, the argument goes, they wouldn't be named saints. But it's this very misunderstanding which causes so many to ignore the saints as the examples we should follow. Their lives are, as St. Francis de Sales put it, "the Gospel put into action."

Another pitfall to be wary of is diminishing the importance of God and his actions in the life of the saint. Again, to cite Chesterton, one can deal with a saint (in this case, Francis of Assisi)

as a figure in secular history and a model of social virtues. He could be presented, not only as a human hero, but a humanitarian hero; indeed as the first hero of humanism. He has been described as a sort of morning star of the Renaissance. And in comparison with all these things, his ascetical theology can be ignored or dismissed as a contemporary accident, which was fortunately not a fatal accident. His religion can be regarded as a superstition, but an inevitable superstition, from which not even genius could wholly free itself. . . . The writer might describe in a purely historical spirit the whole of the great Franciscan inspiration . . . as others have done, almost without raising any religious question at all. In short, he may try to tell the story of a saint without God.¹¹

In 1999, two movies were released about the life of St. Joan of Arc. The first, shown on the CBS network in the U.S., starred Leelee Sobieski and was titled *Joan of Arc*. The second, a theatrical release directed by Luc Besson, was *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*. As one might expect, both movies made much of young Joan's ability as a warrior and a leader of men and had lush scenes of French court life and epic battles galore. Sadly, both movies also suffered from what Chesterton described above. In trying "to tell the story of a saint without God," the filmmakers found themselves forced to procure a substitute for the action of the Almighty in Joan's life. They found it in psychological trauma. In the former movie, Joan is motivated by the death of her friend. In the latter, the rape and murder of her sister pushes Joan over the edge.

It would seem impossible to tell the story of Joan of Arc without mentioning, indeed without emphasizing, the role her heavenly Voices played. Joan believed she was visited and advised by St. Michael, St. Catherine of Alexandria, and St. Margaret. The events of her life ("miraculous" is not too strong a word to describe them), have been seen by believers as proof that her mission was ordained by heaven. It is a disservice to both the subject and the audience if the storyteller ignores the action of God in a saint's life. Perhaps the filmmakers thought the modern, more cynical audience would not accept the fact that it was by the grace of God that Joan of Arc could perform the great feats attributed to her. But without her faith in God, could Joan have done what she did? Without the grace of God to aid her, could she have defeated the English forces at Orléans, raised the siege of that city, cleared the Loire valley of enemy troops, and led the Dauphin to be crowned at Rheims? If God doesn't exist, Joan is reduced to a lunatic. She becomes not a figure to be admired, but an historical curiosity, a freak in a freak story. Without the grace of God behind her actions, St.

Joan's Voices from heaven become nothing more than phantasms raised by a disturbed mind and her great victories nothing more than accidents of history.

The action of God's grace among men and women raises another question: How should the hagiographer approach the subject of miracles? It is possible, as the tales tell us, that St. Catherine of Alexandria, after she was beheaded, picked up her head, walked out of the palace to the gates of the city, and there was met by two angels who flew her to Mt. Sinai, where she was laid to rest. It is possible, but one can be forgiven for remaining a trifle dubious about the accuracy of this tale. More likely is that an overzealous storyteller added layers of myth to the tale of a girl named Catherine who was martyred for the faith.

Hagiographers, while researching their subjects, must be diligent to secure accurate information. They owe their audience the truth, both the good and the ill, about their subjects. Here, the work of the "scientific" hagiographers is a great help. Their research can assist the practical hagiographer in determining just what are the most reliable sources and to separate out those sources that are less truthful. However, this is not to say that miracles have never happened, or that the age of miracles is over. One of the mysteries of our existence is that a transcendent God, Creator of all things, entered his creation and interacts with it to this day. To ignore the possibility of miracles—to write them off as impossible—is to ignore the reality of the Incarnation and the Resurrection. It is to ignore or discredit every miraculous event attributed to the intercession of the saints over the centuries. As historian Warren H. Carroll wrote,

There are many more spurious apparitions and spurious wraiths than genuine ones. Historians must apply all genuine critical standards of scholarship when dealing with these reports. But the arbitrary

a priori assumption that apparitions and miracles and the Incarnation itself could not have happened, that historical events never transcended the natural order, is not a critical standard. It is a flagrant bias which ought to be rejected.¹²

At the same time, it is up to the hagiographer to approach reports of miracles carefully, with all due skepticism. Witnesses must be vetted to ensure they are trustworthy. Physical evidence of the miracle must be collected and studied. All other possible causes must be ruled out before one can attribute an event to the actions of providence directly altering the natural order. Stanly L. Jaki, in his work *Miracles and Physics*, places great emphasis on this. He calls for eyewitnesses to be thoroughly scrutinized, their accounts put through rigorous analysis. In cases where a miraculous healing has been reported, for instance, a panel of medical doctors and scientists should examine the evidence, carefully and clinically, to ensure that no medical reason exists for the supposed miracle. In the end, Jaki states, "This is all a Christian can do about miracles. He has to reassert them as facts, in all their details and context, but he should under no circumstances confuse the skillful and honest presentation of facts with the art of convincing."¹³ Without God, the Church believes, no miracle can take place. It is not, after all, the saint who performs a miracle, but rather the Creator making his power known through the saint's intercession. God may very well make his presence known in the form of a miracle, or he may offer more subtle graces to his followers. But this common understanding—this knowledge that God is with us, this love for Him—is shared by every person honored as a saint. As Thomas à Kempis wrote, "I love You more than myself, nay, I love myself only on account of You."¹⁴

This understanding was there when the early Christians accepted martyrdom rather than burn incense before the Roman idols. It was there in the holy poverty of St. Francis of Assisi and in the holy writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. It was there in the lives of Ven. Pierre Toussaint, who was born a slave in Barbados and died a very rich man in New York City, and St. Kateri Tekakwitha, a Mohawk orphan who died at twenty-four in a French mission in Canada. Whoever they were, whatever their circumstances, they shared this understanding, this grace, this knowledge that they were created beings. Formed by a loving God into his own image, the saints subsumed all else in their desire to love him in return. As the bishops said, “What is common in the varied stories of holiness is the following of Christ expressed in a life of faith active in charity, which is a privileged proclamation of the Gospel.”¹⁵ And, as St. Teresa of Ávila instructed,

Let humility always go first; so as to understand that the strength does not come from ourselves. But it is necessary that we know what this humility is like. I believe the Devil harms people who practice prayer and prevents them from advancing by causing them to misunderstand humility. He makes it appear to us that it is pride to have great desire and want to imitate the saints and long to be martyrs. Then he causes us to think that since we are sinners, the deeds of the saints are for our admiration, not our imitation.¹⁶

It takes real humility to admit that one must change—that one must turn one’s life away from all else and turn to God. At the same time, it requires courage to do such a thing. The rich young man in the Gospels was called, but he could not answer. He had his many comforts, and would not give them up to follow Jesus. The young man “went away sad” (Mt 19:22; Mk 10:22), for, as Léon Bloy said, “the only true sadness is not being a saint.”

All history and all biography look to the past, and describe what has been. So too with hagiography. It describes the lives and times of the holy men and women of God. But hagiography also looks to the future, to our future. It explains the lives we could have if we follow the examples offered by the saints. It shows what we can be if we have both the humility and the courage to answer the call of Christ with an eternal “yes.” When we are called, we must pray for the strength to answer. Jesus upends lives, and turns them inside out. How many of the holy men and women who went before us saw their world turned upside down when they went to answer the call of our Lord?

In the modern world, the word “sin” sits oddly on the tongue and the idea that one would see holiness as an ideal is against the culture. As Pope Francis put it,

In this day and age, unless Christians are revolutionaries, they are not Christians. They must be revolutionaries through grace! Grace itself, which the Father gives us through the crucified, dead, and risen Jesus Christ makes us revolutionaries because—and I again cite Benedict XVI—“he is the greatest mutation in the history of humanity” because he changes lives.¹⁷

Telling the stories of those changed lives has been a part of the Church from her earliest days. Those stories gave courage to the early Christians in the catacombs and inspired their zeal. Tales of the saints have been passed along from parent to child and are with us today. Whether it is the tale of a saint from two millennia or twenty years ago, it is told for the same purpose: to show us that God can change our lives and turn our hearts from this mundane world to knowing, loving, and serving him.



