

Rolheiser: From Saint Tarcisius to People magazine: Our evolution in admiration and imitation

When I was a young boy growing up in a Catholic community, the catechesis of the time tried to inspire the hearts of the young with stories of martyrs, saints, and other people who lived out high ideals in terms of virtue and faith. I remember one story in particular that caught my imagination and inspired me, the story of a third-century Christian martyr, St. Tarcisius.

As legend (or truth) has it, Tarcisius was a twelve-year-old acolyte during the time of the early Christian persecutions. At that time, Christians in Rome were celebrating the Eucharist in secret in the catacombs. After those secret masses someone, a deacon or an acolyte, would carry the Eucharistic species, the Blessed Sacrament, to the sick and to prisoners. One day, after one of those secret masses, young Tarcisius was carrying the Blessed Sacrament on route to a prison when he was accosted by a mob. He refused to hand over the Blessed Sacrament, protected it with his own body, and was beaten to death as a result.

As a twelve-year-old boy that story enflamed my romantic imagination. I wanted to have that kind of high ideal in my life. In my young imagination, Tarcisius was the ultimate hero whom I wanted to be like.

We've come a long way from there, both in our culture and in our churches. We're no longer moved romantically much by either the saints of old or the saints of today. Yes, we still make an official place for them in our churches and in our highest ideals, but now we're moved romantically much more by the lives of the rich, the famous, the beautiful, the pop stars, the professional athletes, the physically gifted, and the intellectually gifted. It's they who now enflame our imaginations, draw our admiration, and who we most like to imitate.

In the early nineteenth century, Alban Butler, an English convert, collected stories of the lives of the saints and eventually set them together in twelve-volume set, famously known as *Butler's Lives of the Saints*. For nearly two hundred years, these books inspired Christians, young and old.

No longer.

Today, *Butler's Lives of the Saints* has effectively been replaced by *People* magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, *Rolling Stone*, *Time* magazine, and the multiple other magazines which chronicle the lives of the rich and famous and stare out at us from every newsstand and grocery-store check-out line.

In effect, we have moved: from St. Tarcisius to Justin Bieber; from Therese of

Lisieux to Taylor Swift; from Thomas Aquinas to Tom Brady; from St. Monica to Meryl Streep; from St. Augustine to Mark Zuckerberg; from Julian of Norwich to Marianne Williamson; and from the first African American saint, St. Martin de Porres, to LeBron James. It's these people who are now enflaming our romantic imagination and inviting our imitation.

Don't get me wrong, it's not that these people are bad or that there's anything wrong with admiring them. Indeed, we owe them some admiration because all beauty and talent take their origin in God who is the author of all good things. From a saint's virtue, to a movie star's physical beauty, to an athlete's grace, there's only one author at the origin of all that grace, God.

Thomas Aquinas once rightly pointed out that to withhold a compliment from someone who deserves it is a sin because we are withholding food from someone who needs it to live on. Beauty, talent, and grace need to be recognized and acknowledged. Admiration is not the issue. The issue rather is that while we need to admire and acknowledge the gifts of the talented and the beautiful, these are not always the lives we should be imitating, unless they also radiate virtue and saintliness.

We shouldn't too easily identify human grace with moral virtue. But that's a problem.

As well, one of the weaknesses in our churches today is that while we have vastly upgraded and refined our intellectual imagination and now have better and healthier theological and biblical studies, we struggle to touch hearts. We struggle to get people to fall in love with their faith and especially with their church. We struggle to enflame their romantic imagination as we once did by invoking the lives of the saints.

Where might we go with all of this? Can we find again saints to enflame our ideals? Can the fine work done today by Robert Ellsberg on hagiography (on the lives of the saints and other moral giants who have passed before us) become the new *Butler's Lives of the Saints*? Can secular biographies of some moral giants in our own age draw our imitation? Is there a St. Tarcisus out there who can inspire the young?

Today, more than ever, we need inspiring stories about women and men, young and old, who have lived out heroic virtue. Without such ideals to emulate, we too quickly identify moral virtue with human grace and deprive ourselves of higher spiritual ideals.