

# The Saints Were as Strange as You Are - And You Can Be as Holy as They Were

If you're like some of the people who post comments on the Religion page of HuffingtonPost, your primary reaction to the news that today is All Saints Day might be: "Who cares?" Or if you're in a more expansive mood: "God is a ridiculous, superstitious tool used as a crutch by the delusional. Religion is a tool for evil in the world. So the saints are easily fooled saps who have sacrificed their life for a lie."

If that's the case, you should probably stop reading here, because -- spoiler alert! -- you probably won't like what I'm going to say.

But even if you're a believer, you may think that the saints have nothing to do with your own life. You've no doubt read some of those gory stories of men and women having their eyes plucked out, or tongues cut out, or bodies devoured by lions in the Coliseum, not to mention stories of their being beheaded, drawn and quartered and so on. One of the most well-known icons in the Catholic Church is that of [St. Lucy](#), the third-century martyr pictured holding her eyeballs on a silver platter, the symbol of her own gruesome end.

"Ugh," you might think. "I'm supposed to emulate that?"

If you're squeamish and can't bear to think of the sufferings that the martyrs endured for their faith (and I haven't even mentioned the fate of [St. Jean de Brébeuf](#)) you may instead think of saints who led ultra-pious lives, like [St. Thérèse of Lisieux](#), the 19th-century Carmelite nun who refused to say a harsh word to anyone; or ultra-ascetic lives like [St. Simon Stylites](#), the fifth-century Christian who lived atop a pillar for years on end; or ultra-active lives like [Blessed Teresa of Calcutta aka Mother Teresa](#), who, well, you know what she did.

And you might still ask: What do all these hyperreligious lives have to do it me?

The short answer is: a lot.

When you read the complete stories of the lives of these saints, and shift your focus from the gruesome details of their martyrdoms and their more extreme ascetical practices, you might meet people who can teach you about being who you are. For each saint lived out his or her call to follow God in an individual way, tailored to their own personalities; and while some of aspects of their biographies seem odd to us today (like any life before, say, 1900 does), if you dig beneath the surface of their often-puzzling lives, you could find something that you might want to emulate: generosity, charity and love.

Their lives are far richer than tales of bloody deaths or overblown feats of prayer. They were human, after all, and had to face the same struggles we do. For example, they had difficulties with their families: [St. Thomas Aquinas'](#) family was so opposed to his entering the Dominican order in the 13th century that they locked him up in a jail. They suffered from physical ailments: [St. Francis of Assisi](#) spent a great deal of his later life battling terrible eye infections. And they faced difficulties from the religious organizations to which they belonged: [St. Ignatius of Loyola](#), the 16th-century founder of the Jesuit order, was several times thrown into jail by the Inquisition, which was suspicious of his ways of praying.

The saints were -- and here is something we usually forget -- human. ("Just like us," as the celebrity mags say about their subjects.) All of them tried the best they could to find a way to God during their own times, in their own circumstances and given their own limited worldviews. That goes a little way to explaining some of the practices that they undertook, which to our minds seem completely outlandish. [St. Aloysius Gonzaga](#), a young 16th-century Jesuit, for example, maintained strict "custody of the eyes," which meant that he avoided looking women in the face to preserve his modesty.

Ridiculous? Of course. But it wasn't seen so in his time. Which begs the obvious question: What practices, religious or otherwise, of our time will look absurd in another 300 years?

Oh, really? Nothing you do is going to look silly, ridiculous or even offensive in 300 years? Don't be so sure. It's probably best not to dismiss a saint who, after all, was a creature of his time and place and of the mores of that time and place. Like we all are.

Better to look at their whole lives, not just the bizarre stories that everyone usually focuses on. Then their relevance to our whole lives becomes clearer. St. Thomas Aquinas, mired as he was in his 13th-century

European worldview, nonetheless spent most of his adult life meditating on the relationship between faith and reason and spent years writing his [\*Summa Theologica\*](#), a text that asked difficult questions about God, about nature and science, about reason and indeed about almost every human experience. St. Thomas would first ask a question like "Whether God exists," and then he would consider all of the relevant objections to the argument at hand, carefully answering them one by one.

At a time when religion was simply something to be believed in, no questions asked, St. Thomas reminded his contemporaries of the value of reason. A real model for his time. For ours, too.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the cosseted product of an overheated 19th-century French Catholic piety, decided that her life, which was circumscribed behind the walls of her Carmelite monastery, was to be focused on a single thing: love. This, she decided, was something within her grasp. So followed what she called her "[Little Way](#)," doing great things with love -- washing dishes, scrubbing floors, praying without apparent results at times and putting up with sisters who irked her. That's something that everyone can relate to, even if you don't plan to spend your life cloistered in a Carmelite monastery.

And St. Aloysius Gonzaga, the Jesuit who maintained the "custody of the eyes," relinquished an enormous fortune and turned down a noble title to devote his life to God and to caring for the poor. The guy you were probably laughing at a few paragraphs ago died caring for plague victims in Rome, at age 22, and is now often looked to by [victims of HIV/AIDS as their patron saint](#).

The lives of the saints, parts of which seem confusing, bizarre and misguided, are -- when you know the whole story -- really tales of love. And they can offer some important lessons for all of us. If we just let them.

So, happy All Saints' Day.