

Every single day I read Robert Ellsberg's concise, fascinating, and inspiring lives of the saints in my copy of *Give Us This Day*. And every single day I am amazed by the astounding lives that have been lived out of love for Christ. Happily, many of these wonderful stories are now gathered together in this marvelous new book, which will guide you through the year with the help of these patrons and companions.

—James Martin, SJ, author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*

This delightful book reminds us how blessed we are, in every age, to have people of good faith who are called to love and serve people in need. They call us all to a greater purpose.

—Kathleen Norris, author of *The Cloister Walk* and *Acedia and Me*

The diversity of these holy men and women calls out my own gifts, and their total dedication alerts me to put my “yes” into motion for the day. Thank you for being a companion and inspiration for my faith journey!

—Carolyn Y. Woo, President and CEO of Catholic Relief Services and author of *Working for a Better World*

This is not only a classic collection of lives of the saints but also an introduction to many un-canonized holy lives, producing such delightful juxtapositions as St. Nicholas and Mozart, St. Mary Magdalene and Albert Luthuli, St. Monica and Helder Camara. As a reader of *Give Us This Day*, from which these are drawn, I've enjoyed meeting new holy men and women and am now delighted to have them alongside traditional saints of the day. Thank you for this literary treat.

—Christopher Jamison, OSB, Director of the National Office for Vocation, London, and author of *Finding Sanctuary*

Robert Ellsberg is way up there in my pantheon of spiritual writers. He's especially good at connecting us with the divine spark in practitioners of every spiritual tradition. These very human stories of the holy ones among us have a special knack of enlivening my spirit.

—Helen Prejean, CSJ, author of *Dead Man Walking*

Saints are the living Word of God, the Word made flesh, but their biographies are often too encrusted within sentimentality and piety to serve as an inspiration for us. Ellsberg gives us their essence in this treasure of a book. Nobody writes better about the lives of the saints than Robert Ellsberg!

—Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, President of the Oblate School of Theology and author of *The Holy Longing* and *Sacred Fire*

It is a challenge to provide inspiration in a brief and daily format. Robert Ellsberg's writing does so, exposing us to numerous little-known saints, with a generous sprinkling of contemporary saintly lives, his signature contribution. This book is a keeper.

—Pat Farrell, OSF, Past President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious

# Blessed Among Us

Day by Day  
with Saintly Witnesses

*Robert Ellsberg*

*A Give Us This Day Book*



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To Mary Stommes,  
Sue Kuefler,  
and Peter Dwyer.

*“It all happened while we sat there talking,  
and it is still going on.”*

—Dorothy Day





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## INTRODUCTION

From the early days of Christianity it was understood that a Christian was someone who strived to imitate or follow Christ. This was not simply a matter of believing in certain doctrines but of allowing one's identity and way of life to be shaped by Jesus and his example of self-giving love. One was not born this way; in some way or another it involved a process of conversion, of "putting off the old person and putting on Christ," as St. Paul put it. All Christians were called to this conversion—the work of a lifetime, even if it might begin, as it did for Paul, with a dramatic turning point.

As Jesus foretold of his disciples, those who followed this path were liable to share his own fate: misunderstanding, persecution, and even death. For that reason, in the early Church, martyrdom became a particular proof of authentic discipleship. Beginning with the first martyr, St. Stephen, such witnesses (the literal meaning of martyr) were seen as reenacting the passion of Christ. It was said of St. Polycarp, an early bishop who was martyred in 155, that his very death was "conformable to the gospel." The early Christians venerated the stories of such witnesses, preserving their relics and memorializing the anniversaries of their deaths—their *dies natalis*, or birth to eternal life. This was the origin of the cult of saints.

As the era of persecution waned, it became clear that there were other ways, no less heroic, of bearing witness to Christ—through ascetical lives of prayer, service to the Church, or the

practice of charity. New models of holiness emerged in the form of desert monastics, missionaries, bishops, and other teachers of the Christian faith. Regardless of the form, there were certain individuals who set a standard for Christian practice; their witness inspired the faith of their contemporaries, even evoking a sense of wonder. Such individuals seemed a living link with the Gospel itself. As Alban Butler, one of the great English compilers of saints' lives, put it, they were "the Gospel clothed, as it were, in a body."

In the early days, saints were recognized more or less by public acclamation. Their memory was preserved through the ongoing prayers of the faithful. To the extent that such devotion was reinforced by reports of miracles, attention often shifted from the actual lives of the saints to their role as heavenly patrons. *The Golden Legend*, a collection of saints' lives by Jacobus de Voragine (d. 1298), was one of the most popular books of the Middle Ages. It emphasized the fabulous and miraculous deeds of the saints—helping to boost the popularity of such figures as St. George (who battled a dragon) or St. Christopher (who carried the Christ child on his back) over much better-attested, if more prosaic, figures as St. Augustine or St. Ambrose.

Over time, the Vatican assumed responsibility for the naming of saints, introducing the much more complicated process of canonization. Among the minimal criteria was the reasonable confidence that such a person in fact existed. But there were many other considerations and factors to be examined—so many that the process could take centuries. In recent years Pope John Paul II streamlined the procedure considerably. Moved by a belief that the Church needed more examples of holiness from our own time and from many diverse cultures, he beatified and canonized over a thousand men and women—far more than in previous centuries combined.

Nevertheless, the process still remains complicated. Saints are usually proposed for canonization in the diocese in which

they lived. If their “cause” is accepted in Rome, they are declared Servants of God. At that point a lengthy investigation of their life and writings is conducted; witnesses, if still living, must be interviewed; records attesting to the candidate’s orthodoxy and heroic virtues are submitted to Rome. If all this is accepted, the candidate is named Venerable. And then a very particular condition comes into play: certified miracles must be attributed to the candidate’s intercession, one to be beatified, or declared Blessed, another to be canonized and declared a Saint. (In the case of a martyr—such as Oscar Romero, recently beatified—the first miracle is waived.)

Needless to say, such an extensive and prolonged process tends to be quite selective. It favors those with an enduring community—such as a religious order—willing to invest the time and resources, often over a span of generations. For that reason, even among the list of contemporary saints, a great number are founders or members of religious congregations. Unfortunately, this tends to perpetuate a narrow understanding of holiness as primarily the attribute of celibate priests and members of religious orders—a relatively small number of the faithful.

And yet, as the Church clearly teaches, holiness is the universal vocation of every Christian. In the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Church we read: “In the Church not everyone marches along the same path, yet all are called to sanctity” (*Lumen Gentium* 32). As the document explains, the paths to holiness are without number. Regardless of whether we are priests, nuns, or laypeople, regardless of whether we are celibate or married, of exceptional abilities, or completely average, there is a path to holiness that takes account of our particular gifts and duties in life, a path that is different for each one of us. All Christians are called to walk that path, its goal none other than the fullness of love.

It is holiness, and not canonization, that is the goal of Christian life. And yet the veneration of canonized saints can foster a very different impression. It may also lead us to suppose that

saints are a relatively small number of exceptional figures (usually men, almost never laypeople), as remote from the experience of most ordinary Christians as the figures in a stained-glass window. In fact, the actual number of saints is infinitely wider. It includes all those holy men and women, many known only to a few or to God alone, who are memorialized collectively on November 1, the feast of All Saints. It is to be in *that* number (as the old hymn puts it) that we place our hopes when the “saints go marching in.”

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The present volume is drawn from entries I have written over the past five years for *Give Us This Day*, a resource for daily prayer, published monthly by Liturgical Press. In selecting entries the editors encouraged me to draw widely from the annals of historical saints, as well as those currently on the road to canonization. But they also urged me to include men and women beyond the official list, including some who clearly fall outside the official criteria for sainthood. I needed little encouragement in this direction. This expansive spirit reflects the approach of my previous books, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* and *Blessed Among All Women: Reflections on Women Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time*. (Readers interested in more comprehensive treatments of many of the figures in this volume may well be interested in consulting those works.) While most readers of *Give Us This Day* have welcomed this approach, it may call for some further explanation.

I believe the underlying spirit is reflected in the title chosen for both the daily column as well as the present volume: “Blessed Among Us.” While generally guided by the official calendar of saints, I have tried to invoke a more inclusive “cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1)—an eclectic company of men and women whose example may expand our moral imagina-

tions and thus inspire us to answer more faithfully our own call to holiness.

The example of saints and holy people has always served this function. The conversion of St. Augustine was prompted in part by his reading the life of St. Antony, one of the early Desert Fathers. St. Ignatius Loyola was inspired in his vocation by *The Golden Legend*—the only reading material at hand as he was recovering from a war injury. St. Edith Stein converted to Catholicism after staying up all night reading the life of St. Teresa of Avila. There is a contagious effect to such stories, as one lamp lights another.

But the influence of great minds and souls is not restricted to those who pass the rigorous test of canonization. Pope Francis offered his own suggestive opening, in his address to the U.S. Congress in 2015, when he pointed to the example of four “great Americans”: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton. Such figures, he noted, “offer us a way of seeing and interpreting reality.”

Among the canonized saints we find many who struggled to respond in the spirit of Christ to the needs of their time and thereby opened a path for others to follow. But there are many other men and women who challenge us to see and interpret the reality of our own time: an era of globalization and religious pluralism, of new scientific awareness as well as massive violence, an era marked, among other things, by unprecedented threats to the well-being of the earth, our home. Among saints of the past, rooted in very different cultural contexts, many are distinctly unhelpful in responding to our present needs. All the more reason to take a broader view.

At the same time this brings us back to the teachings of Jesus. Long before the official process of canonization with its criteria of orthodoxy, the evidence of an enduring cult, and the certification of miracles, he set the conditions for our salvation: “I was hungry and you fed me . . . naked and you clothed me. . . . Insofar as you did these things for the least of my



brothers and sisters, you did them to me.” We have his story of the Good Samaritan—the very definition of an outsider—who served to demonstrate what it truly means to love our neighbor as ourselves. We have his recital of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . the merciful . . . the pure of heart . . . the peacemakers . . .” These are not exactly the traditional criteria for naming saints. But they come closer to characterizing the qualities that unify the diverse men and women whose stories are recounted here, all these “blessed among us.”

ROBERT ELLSBERG

## JANUARY

- 1** Mary, Mother of Jesus • St. Zdislava Berka
- 2** St. Basil the Great • Blessed Marie Anne Blondin
- 3** St. Genevieve • Lanza del Vasto
- 4** St. Synclctica • St. Elizabeth Ann Seton
- 5** St. John Neumann • St. Genevieve Torres Morales
- 6** St. Gertrude of Delft • St. André Bessette
- 7** St. Angela of Foligno • St. Raphaela Mary
- 8** Giotto • Galileo Galilei
- 9** Blessed Alix le Clercq • Venerable Pauline Jaricot
- 10** St. Leonie Aviat • Blessed Maria Dolores Rodriguez Sopena
- 11** Lambert Beauduin • Mev Puleo
- 12** St. Aelred of Rievaulx • St. Marguerite Bourgeoys
- 13** Blessed Jutta of Huy • George Fox
- 14** Blessed Odoric of Pordenone • Anthony Brouwers
- 15** St. Ita • St. Arnold Janssen
- 16** St. Joseph Vaz • Blessed Juana Maria Lluch
- 17** St. Antony of Egypt • Roberto de Nobili
- 18** St. Prisca • St. Margaret of Hungary
- 19** St. Paula • Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart
- 20** Alessandro Valignano • Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi
- 21** St. Agnes • Venerable Mary Angeline McCrory
- 22** Blessed William Joseph Chaminade • Venerable Satoko Kitahara
- 23** Blessed James the Almsgiver • St. Marianne Cope
- 24** St. Francis de Sales • Blessed Nikolaus Gross
- 25** Dorothy Hennessey • Samuel Ruiz
- 26** Saints Timothy and Titus • Blessed Michael Kozal
- 27** St. Angela Merici • Mahalia Jackson
- 28** St. Thomas Aquinas • Fyodor Dostoevsky
- 29** St. Andrei Rublev • Maisie Ward
- 30** Venerable Mary Ward • Mohandas Gandhi
- 31** St. Marcella • St. John Bosco



**JANUARY**

## Mary, Mother of Jesus

(First Century)

**M**ary, a young Galilean woman of Nazareth, was betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph. One day, according to the Gospel of Luke, she was visited by the angel Gabriel, who proclaimed that she would bear a son named Jesus, who would be called “the Son of the Most High.” How could this be, she asked, since she was as yet unmarried? The angel told her she would conceive by the power of the Spirit and assured her, “With God nothing will be impossible.” And so she responded, “Let it be done to me according to your word.”

It was in the space created by Mary’s faith—and not simply in her womb—that the Word became flesh. For this reason she has been called not only the Mother of Jesus but Mother of the Church. In subsequent centuries, Mary’s status and her distinctive nature would be the subject of dogmatic pronouncements and learned tomes. In the Gospels Jesus frequently rejected the claims of blood or natural kinship in favor of discipleship. In this perspective, Mary’s preeminence is due to her having exemplified the spirit of true discipleship: attention, reverence, and obedience to the word and will of God.

The Gospel of John places Mary at the foot of the cross. According to Luke she was among the disciples who gathered in Jerusalem after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:14). She was in effect the first and paradigmatic disciple. She is thus the first to be honored among the saints.

*“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”*

—Luke 1:46-49

## St. Zdislava Berka

Dominican Tertiary (1220–1252)

**S**t. Zdislava was born to a noble family in Bohemia. A precociously pious child, at the age of seven she tried running off to the forest to pursue the life of a hermit. Her parents restrained her. Eventually, they also compelled her to marry Count Havel of Lemberk, with whom she bore four children.

Together they occupied a fortified castle in a frontier area subject to the incursion of Mongol invaders. While Havel engaged in frequent battles, Zdislava generously opened the doors of the castle to homeless refugees. She obliged her husband's insistence that she wear costly garments, befitting her station; he, in turn, tolerated her extravagant charity. According to one story, when Havel tried to evict a sick beggar from their bed, he found the man transformed into the figure of Christ crucified. (According to a more prosaic version of the story, Zdislava gave away their bed and replaced it with a crucifix.)

At some point, when Zdislava learned of the Dominican Order, she hastened to become one of the earliest Tertiaries. She endowed hospitals, helped build churches with her own hands, and established a Dominican convent, where she was eventually buried.

St. Zdislava was canonized in 1995. She is the patron of those in difficult marriages and those ridiculed for their piety.

*“Faithful God, by her married life and works of charity you taught Saint Zdislava to pursue the way of perfection. By her prayers, may family life be strengthened and be a witness to Christian virtue.”*

—General Calendar of the Order of Preachers

## St. Basil the Great

Bishop and Doctor of the Church (ca. 330–379)

**S**t. Basil was raised in a family of saints (his parents, three siblings, as well as his grandmother would all be canonized). Yet there was nothing inevitable about his vocation. Only at the age of thirty did he experience a deep conversion—like “waking from a profound sleep”—and renounce all worldly ambitions to devote his life to God. After touring the monastic world, Basil established a monastery in his hometown of Caesarea. Rather than stressing individual feats of asceticism, Basil’s rule emphasized the importance of community. The monastery, he believed, should be an ideal society in which love of God and love of neighbor would be cultivated in tandem. He believed the monastery should be at the service of society. Guests were welcome. The monastery included both an orphanage and a school and became a center for the works of mercy.

Eventually Basil became the bishop of Caesarea. Aside from his role as a champion of theological orthodoxy (along with his brother Gregory of Nyssa he helped to define Church teaching on the Trinity), he was a persistent advocate for social justice, going beyond the usual exhortation to charity. The needs of the poor, he taught, held a social mortgage on the superfluous holdings of the rich. Basil died on January 1, 379.

*“Are you not a robber, you who consider your own that which has been given you solely to distribute to others? This bread which you have set aside is the bread of the hungry . . . those riches you have hoarded are the riches of the poor.”*

—St. Basil the Great

## Blessed Marie Anne Blondin

Founder, Sisters of St. Anne (1809–1890)

**E**sther Blondin, the daughter of poor farmers, was born in Lower Canada. At twenty, she entered domestic service, eventually finding work with a teaching order in Montreal. There she learned to read and write, managing eventually to be hired as a teacher and even to serve as principal of a parochial school.

In 1848 she proposed to the bishop of Montreal to found a congregation dedicated to the “education of poor country children, both boys and girls in the same schools” (a daring proposal for the time). With his approval, a novitiate was established for the new congregation, the Sisters of St. Anne. In 1850, Blondin, who had taken the religious name Marie Anne, was selected to serve as superior.

While the order quickly grew and spread, a new chaplain, appointed by the bishop, began to exert dictatorial control. When Mother Marie Anne resisted, he compelled her to resign as superior. Although she complied without protest, he was not satisfied until she had been relegated to a position of complete obscurity. She spent the rest of her life performing domestic chores in the laundry and kitchen. When a novice asked why the foundress was assigned to such lowly work, she replied, “The deeper a tree sinks its roots into the soil, the greater are its chances of growing and producing fruit.”

Blondin died on January 2, 1890. A generation would pass before her memory was restored to honor in her congregation. She was beatified in 2001.

*“May Holy Eucharist and perfect abandonment to God’s Will be your heaven on earth.”*

—Spiritual testament of Blessed Marie Anne Blondin to her sisters