

CHAPTER THREE

Basic Attitudes

WE AIM IN THIS CHAPTER TO GET A FEEL FOR THE INNER thought patterns of the saints. How do they see reality and their place in it? What is their outlook on life? What are the consequences of their being so completely in love with God? Ordinary folk might put the question more prosaically: What makes them tick?

Our sketches here are purposely brief; more thorough analyses will follow in later chapters. I suggest that the reader notice and ponder the interrelationships—indeed, the intercausality—among the various traits we are discussing. They are not haphazard, just happening by chance in these remarkable men and women, as a bit of attention and active thinking will prove.

1. *God-centered.* Anyone in love, genuine love, is spontaneously focused on the beloved. God is the saints' consuming concern. While they tend to see vividly the beauties of creation and especially the preciousness of each human person, they also see everything through and in the light of the love of their lives. They live the words of the psalmist, "My eyes are always on Yahweh" (Psalm 25:15). Being in love is like that.

"What we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God, and all our worldly ambitions"

(Titus 2:12). This is exactly what the saints gladly do. Saint Paul expresses this trait again in one of his letters to the faithful in Corinth: “Whatever you eat, whatever you drink, whatever you do at all, do it for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

2. *Total.* Being thoroughly in love implies fullness of response in daily decision making. It is easy for a spouse to declare, “Darling, I love you with all my heart,” but a few minutes later show grouchy impatience. That love is far from total.

It is not accidental that when Jesus proclaimed the core and greatest commandment of love, he emphasized its wholeness several times: “*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*” (Matthew 22:37). Corner cutting is foreign to the mind of the saint.

Saints Catherine of Sienna and Francis Xavier were windmills of work and activity on behalf of the faithful, but at prayer they were the deepest of mystics, lost in profound intimacy with their Beloved.

3. *Balanced.* One may be tempted to think that a divine focus combined with totality would yield excess in one direction or another, but such is not the case when a person’s virtues have become heroic—which we will explain in chapter five. The Church will not canonize a candidate unless all the virtues are present to a heroic degree, and this requires a remarkable balance, a beautiful harmony and proportion.

Vatican Council II declared that the faithful should be “eager to act and yet devoted to contemplation, present in

this world and yet not at home in it” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2). A rare beauty. Married and religious, priests and bishops, the saints give due attention to their social obligations, but they also appreciate the need for frequent periods of healthy silence. Most of them fast on occasion and are sparing at the table, and yet they eat sufficiently to maintain health. While they know that they are to live without limit the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, which aim directly at God, they are also aware that the moral virtues, which deal with created matters, are found in a mean between extremes. For them balance does not translate into mediocrity, a divided love.

4. *Determined.* Velleities, mere wishes, never produce excellence in any worthwhile human endeavor—scholarship, music, art or sports. The same is true for virtuous living—that is, personal excellence. In the spiritual life it is not enough to say, “I wish I were better,” “I should improve,” “I admire the saints, but...”. Admiration and flabby desires get us nowhere.

Saints say, “With God’s grace I will be better, and I will begin right now. I will get rid of my vanities and my laziness. I will stop gossiping and overeating. I will stop procrastinating. I will take means to see that these changes do occur soon.”

Saint Paul was clear: “The love of Christ urges us on” (2 Corinthians 5:14, RSV); “I treat my body hard and make it obey me” (1 Corinthians 9:27). Without hesitation he takes the hard road and the narrow gate that open up to real happiness and an abundant life (see Matthew 7:13–14; John 10:10).¹

5. *Dauntless in the faith.* Saints are so profoundly in love that they become fearless in the face of even extreme sufferings and sacrifices. As we have noted, they may be naturally weak, but their deep union in prayer with Divine Omnipotence gives them awesome strength. How else could we explain the burning love of Saint John de Brebeuf, who welcomed the brutal tortures and execution awaiting him at the hands of North American Indians? In his diary we read of his impassioned, fearless, love-penetrated protestations:

For two days now I have experienced a great desire to be a martyr and to endure all the torments the martyrs suffered.

...In truth I vow to you, Jesus my Savior, that as far as I have the strength I will never fail to accept the grace of martyrdom, if some day you in your infinite mercy should offer it to me, your most unworthy servant.

...Further, I bind myself to this so that, on receiving the blow of death, I shall accept it from your hands with the fullest delight and joy of spirit. For this reason, my beloved Jesus, and because of the surging joy which moves me, here and now I offer my blood and body and life.

...My God, even if all the brutal tortures which prisoners in this region must endure should fall on me, I offer myself most willingly to them and I alone shall suffer them all.²

6. *Utterly ecclesial.* Without exception saints have loved and do love the Church deeply, and this includes loving her

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teaching, her liturgical norms and her discipline. Even in the dark days of clerical scandals, when the lives of some bishops, priests and religious were far removed from the goodness and beauty of the gospel, our heroes of holiness responded not in mediocrity but in strict adherence to magisterial doctrine and liturgical norms.

These men and women knew and lived perfectly Jesus' words about the authority of Church leaders: "Anyone who listens to you listens to me; anyone who rejects you rejects me, and those who reject me reject the one who sent me" (Luke 10:16). He made it clear likewise that he stands behind the authority of his Church until the end of the world: "And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Matthew 28:20). He foretold that there would be scandals in his flock yet assured that the leaders would never lead the sheep astray in their binding teaching (see Matthew 16:18–19; 18:18). So it has been through the centuries.

The saints took their Lord at his word. They never left this Church he founded, nor were they even slightly inclined toward what is now called "cafeteria Catholicism," picking and choosing teachings they would accept. Never has a theological or liturgical dissenter been canonized—a simple historical fact that some of our brothers and sisters seem not to notice.

7. *Eager for the inspired Word.* Utter faithfulness to the Church is closely allied to, indeed flows out of, a glad embrace of the biblical message. This is an ideal example of the inter-causality between these basic attitudes of the saints.

Once a month in the four-week cycle of the *Liturgy of the Hours*, we are reminded of Jeremiah 15:16: “When I found your words, I devoured them; / they became my joy and the happiness of my heart.”³ There is nothing luke-warm about the prophet’s reaction to the divine Word.

Humble Teresa of Avila once remarked that she had never heard a sermon from which she did not profit. Most people would be pleased to note that they changed for the better from one homily out of ten. Heroically holy ones listen to the word of God and then get out and act on it, as Jesus admonished all of us to do (see Matthew 7:24).

8. *Joyously enthusiastic.* Saints are never bored, jaded or drifting. Healthy individuals in love with the Lord naturally “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4, RSV). In their freedom from egocentrism and in their God-centeredness, they experience “a joy so glorious that it cannot be described” (1 Peter 1:8). Our English word *enthusiasm* derives from the Greek word meaning “possessed by a god, having God within.” Filled as the saints are “with the utter fulness of God” (Ephesians 3:19)—that is, filled with endless beauty, love and delight—it is no surprise that they do not experience boredom.

The faithful of the Old Testament were likewise thrilled with gladness in their living God (see Psalm 84:2). They pursued him with endless shouts of exultation and triumph (see Psalms 5:11; 20:5). They prayed at times with lyre and harp, string and reed, tambourine and castanet, beating of drums, clashing of cymbals and dancing as well (see Psalms 87; 149; 150; 2 Samuel 6:5). (If he who sings in worship prays twice, perhaps these dancing people were praying thrice!)

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Nothing dreary or dull here: God was in their midst. This enthusiasm was not a mere emotional experience, though feelings can be a natural overflow. And we should note that this great delight in God is compatible with disappointments and sufferings—which suggests the next basic outlook of the supernaturally transformed person.

9. *Welcoming the cross.* Even though the saints, like the rest of us, feel a natural repugnance toward suffering (as did Jesus himself in his agony in the garden), they nonetheless generously embrace the hardships that come their way in daily life (see Luke 9:23). They likewise go out of their way to fast prudently on occasion and otherwise to chastise their bodies, to correct what is amiss in their behavior (see again 1 Corinthians 9:27).

Saint Paul was so enamored of the Lord's cross and his share in it that he wanted to know only Jesus and him crucified (see 1 Corinthians 2:2). Loving to share in the Lord's passion is deeply engrained in the outlook of the saints.

10. *Intellectual and academic honesty.* More than a few readers may be surprised at this saintly trait and the extended attention I give it in chapter seven. Most of us assume that scholars are honest in their thinking, speaking and writing. I should like to think that most are, but experience over the years in both scientific and theological fields indicates not a few exceptions. Especially is this the case when the two have common concerns.

Let it be said here that the saints are among those to whom we can look for the truth. There are many scholarly saints who have devoted their intellects and their lives to contesting heresy and expounding truth. Of particular

note are the giants of the patristic age—such as Augustine, Athanasius and John Chrysostom; the medieval greats—Albert, Thomas, Bonaventure and Robert Bellarmine; and their noncanonized associates—such as Cajetan, Suarez and the Spanish Salmanticenses.

We also find this intellectual honesty in the underappreciated manuals of moral theology common in the twentieth century. These authors assumed as obvious that objections are to be faced and given competent responses. Nothing was to be covered over.

11. *Logically consistent.* For many people, even religiously-minded ones, there is a considerable gap, sometimes sizeable, between what they profess in their prayers and what they actually do in practice. It is easy for a man to say in his prayers, “Lord, I love you with all my heart,” and a few minutes later prove that his heart is divided by eating too much, watching useless television or snapping at his wife. Or a woman may avow in her morning devotions, “I want to love my neighbor as myself,” and later engage in gossip or grouchiness. The same inconsistencies occur among members of consecrated life and among the clergy.

Not so with the saints. What they profess they live. When they hear or read that deep intimacy with God is the “one thing,” the top priority in life, they decide to make meditative and contemplative prayer a daily practice. When they realize that God is himself endless delight, a delight he wants to share with us, they make up their minds to give up everything that does not lead to him—just as Saint Paul told all of us to do (see Philippians 3:8).