Saints for a New Situation

Everywhere in church circles today you hear a lament: Our churches are emptying. We've lost our youth. This generation no longer finds us relevant. We need to announce Jesus again, as if for the first time, but how? The church is becoming evermore marginalized.


I suspect it's some combination of all of these, but single out one issue here to highlight, affluence. Jesus told us how to be rich and poor, both at once. His Gospel was the good news for those who aren't any good at, is how to be Christians when we're affluent, sophisticated, and constitute the cultural mainstream.

So, I'm suggesting that what we need today is not so much a new pastoral approach as a new kind of saint, an individual into whose life and times we could begin to place our own. Someone who can model for us practically what it means to live out the Gospel in a context of affluence and secularity. Why this?

One of the lessons of history is that often genuine religious renewal, the type that actually reshapes the religious landscape, looks more like a personal spiritual transformation than a reformation. The type of religious renewal that changes us, that makes we into new persons, is often so much a crisis of faith as a crisis of imagination. No Christians before us have ever lived within this kind of world.

What will this new kind of saint, this new St. Francis, look like? I honestly don't know. Neither, it seems, does anyone else. But there is a third way, a way beyond both our failures and our success. We may not have now, we find that our scriptures are still full of fresh insight. We may lack imagination, but we don't lack hope.

Christ promised we will not be orphaned, and that promise is sure. God is still with us and our age will produce its own saints. The saints of the twentieth century produced their own new kind of saints, the saints of the twenty-first century will be the new religious leaders who will teach us, and our children, how to live as Christians in this new situation.

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