

BEARING WITNESS TO THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

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Colleen Carroll Campbell,
My Sisters the Saints: A Spiritual Memoir, Image.

At a time in our culture of rampant secularism, anomie, and hedonic self-absorption, Colleen Carroll Campbell's *My Sisters the Saints* is a rarity, insofar as it concerns her quest to find and fulfill her identity as a Christian woman, or what Blessed John Paul II called the "feminine genius."

How bracing to encounter so countercultural a memoir. Audaciously, one might say, Campbell, an author, journalist, and former speechwriter, blends a personal, earth-bound account of painful crises in her life over a 15-year period with a much loftier narrative, namely, the transcendent and mystical story of her gradually developing awareness of the living reality of the communion of saints.

Catholics profess this scripturally rooted, ethereally communitarian belief in the Apostles' Creed in connection with "the holy catholic Church." The affirmation has two intimately connected meanings, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: communion in holy goods (*sancta*) and among holy people (*sancti*).

That is, the communion of saints is the Church, with Christ at its head communicating His riches to all the members. Some of these members are still wayfarers on earth, while others have died and are being purified. Yet others, such as the saints with whom the author communes, already gloriously contemplate in the afterlife the triune God Himself.

Dwelling in closer and holier unity with Christ in heaven than

we earthly pilgrims, these saints are better able to intercede unceasingly, fraternally, and to our immense benefit, with the Father. In the words of Pope Paul VI, "we believe that in this communion [of all the faithful in Christ], the merciful love of God and his saints is always [attentive] to our prayers."

The communion of saints, Campbell's overriding theme, is thus closely bound to the main insight of Christian and Jewish eschatologies, immortality. This insight, as scholar Carol Zaleski explains in her marvelous essay, "In Defense of Immortality," is founded on two premises. To paraphrase her, we humans are creatures, amalgams of dust and the Creator's life-giving breath, and we are created in His image and likeness with a royal destiny that transcends our finite condition.

We hope to see God, not through any worthiness on our part, but because, in making us, He has imprinted on us His immortal image. To be immortal— to arrive finally at what Campbell calls "our eternal home"—is thus to be a mortal who has been given the pure gift of sharing in God's immortality.

Moreover, Zaleski adds, "immortality is the life of the world to come, already partially realized in the communion of saints, both living and dead...In Saint Paul's words, the activity of the Holy Spirit in this life is the first installment of immortality...Its effects are not confined to a circle of illuminati orbiting the divine throne, but spill over to all souls both living and dead"

In *My Sisters the Saints*, Campbell poignantly recounts how she found answers to her anguished prayers at critical points in her life through spiritual "sisterhood" with six great women saints—*illuminatae* already sharing in God's immortality. As a result of studying their lives and seeking their intercession, she bears witness to having been heard and aided by them. In the process, she attests to having found the real meaning of liberation in service to others.

The author's spiritual odyssey began with chancing upon her devout father's copy of a biography of St. Teresa of Ávila, after a period in a Milwaukee college when she nearly abandoned God, living the drunken and sexually uninhibited life of a "liberated" party girl. Experiencing a profound sense of desolation, she increasingly questioned extremist feminist orthodoxy, in particular, its perverse attitudes toward women and men, motherhood, and God. Turning in prayer "as a friend" to the bold mystic and reformer Teresa, Campbell came to identify intensely with and admire her faith, femininity, and passionate nature. With this encounter, an intense desire for divine intimacy awakened within her.

Warily, she then read a biography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Expecting to find the holy Carmelite's "little way" childish and cloying, the author discovered instead its powerful and mature, yet gloriously childlike, confidence in God, and her spirituality founded on secret and unheralded acts of sacrifice and love. With her beloved father suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Campbell discovered that Thérèse's father had similarly fallen victim to dementia. The saint's insight that the "little ones" among us are channels of grace, not encumbrances or humiliations, changed the course of the author's professional life. With Thérèse as her "patroness," she became in her writings and activism ardently pro-life as well as dedicated to the protection of the sick and vulnerable in the end-of-life controversy.

In love with a devout medical student, Campbell then struggled with the fear of submerging her own ambitious career plans in the demands inherent in being a doctor's wife. Her decision to opt for marriage, which required her to leave a prestigious job as a valued speechwriter for President George W. Bush, was deeply influenced by her reading of the diary of Saint Maria Faustina. This simple, uneducated Polish saint, who spent much of her life doing menial labor, had many mystical experiences, which included a vision of Jesus with radiant rays streaming

from his chest. According to Faustina's journal, Jesus asked her to paint his image with these words beneath it: "Jesus, I trust in you." She also created a new, Eucharistic, internationally prayed rosary prayer that came to be known as the Divine Mercy chaplet. Faustina's focus on trust in Jesus touched Campbell deeply. In imitation of the saint's humility and bottomless trust, she gave up her work at the very center of world power and unreservedly committed to marital union.

For Campbell, an agonizing period of infertility and yearning to have children ensued. She sought counsel in the faith-based philosophy of St. Edith Stein, the eminent Jewish-born philosopher and Catholic convert; the Carmelite nun died in Auschwitz after publicly denouncing Nazism.

Both Campbell and Edith's spiritual quest began with reading the life of Teresa of Ávila. After reading Teresa, Edith pronounced, "This is the truth." The key to Campbell's identification with the self-proclaimed feminist Edith lies in the saint's understanding of "feminine singularity": the distinct differences with which women naturally relate to their bodies, motherhood, the world, and God. According to Stein, their inclination to openness, maternal nurturing, courageous defense of the vulnerable, and generosity propel them to a loving and passionate union with God and, in Edith's words, an "exceptional receptivity for [His] work in the soul." Most epiphanic for Campbell was the saint's conception of spiritual maternity, the notion that women need not bear children to exercise their maternal giftedness. So it was that Campbell resolved to exercise spiritual maternity in her own life, especially by more actively caring for her father and integrating faith more fully in her writing.

Struggling to come to terms with her difficulty in conceiving and her father's rapidly darkening mind, Campbell, in preparing to lead a conference on the legacy of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, read *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*. Therein, this saint of the

destitute and dying of Calcutta's slums, revealed her excruciating, prolonged sense of having been abandoned by God. This was interpreted by her spiritual director as a "reparatory darkness" intended not to expunge sin from the one who endures it, but to permit that soul to suffer for those who reject God and thereby, as Teresa stated it, "light the light of those in darkness on earth." In a stirring expression of her ability to see Christ in suffering humanity, she exhorted the sisters in the Missionaries of Charity, the order she founded on His bidding in a vision, to see themselves as "contemplatives in the heart of the world. For we are touching the body of Christ 24 hours." With unshaken faith in the saint, Campbell writes of "the light Mother Teresa's example could cast into my own darkness." In imitation of Teresa, she lovingly assisted her father in death. Racked with grief at his burial, she took the unexpected appearance of a bevy of cheerfully consoling Missionaries of Charity, swathed in blue-and-white saris, as a God-given sign that Teresa herself was present and interceding for her and her father.

At age thirty-four Campbell at last conceived, in a pregnancy fraught with complications that threatened the lives of her unborn twins. In agonized prayer she turned to Church teaching about Mary of Nazareth, enabling her to discern her most exalted place in the communion of saints. Reading *Daughter Zion* by Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, she was struck by his characterization of Mary's Assumption into heaven as "the highest degree of canonization," that is, the fruit of her attainment of "the totality of grace" and, thus, "the totality of salvation." Campbell also recognized the influence that Mary has exerted in leading the rest of the faithful to heaven. From a sentimental, near magic-driven perception of Mary, Campbell writes of having progressed gradually to having a deep admiration and affection for her as well as a desire to imitate her virtues. Entrusting her "nightmarish" sorrow regarding her high-risk pregnancy to Mary, she came to feel the Mother of Jesus to be as real a

mother to her as her own earthly one. With the entry of her healthy twins in the world, she marveled and gave thanks for what one physician called a “miracle” birth.

In a final, fitting, and full-throated affirmation of her two sublime preoccupations—her friends in the communion of saints and our royal destiny in ecstatic union with God—Campbell joyously recalls the Baptism, on the Feast of All Saints, of her children. The litany to friends the saints, sung during the rite, ended with this exhortation: “All you holy men and women, pray for us.” In declaring her desire that her children “live to be saints,” she further affirms, with near palpable certainty, that “the eternal embrace of Love...awaits us at our destination.”

The author’s ringing testament of faith, hope, and charity stands in stark contrast to today’s often reflexive skepticism and entrapment in this-worldliness. As Zaleski notes, people “are starved for transcendence, hungry for miracles, and sure of only one thing: if life is to be truly meaningful, death must not be allowed to have the last word.”

Campbell’s spiritual journey could well serve to move many to rethink what immortality and heaven might mean.

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