

Review of: SAINTS TO LEAN ON; Spiritual Companions for Illness and Disability by Janice McGrane, S.S.J. (St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, OH)

Talk about taking lemons and making lemonade, this book is a real boon to those dealing with physical and mental illnesses, including caregivers, nurses, physicians and family members. In addressing the fact that illness is a part of the human condition, the author says "Inherent in the struggle with illness and disability is the grace: that mystical gift of God that empowers us and helps us to grow." She goes on to say that "It is when we are open to this mystical gift that the very vehicle of its giving...the illness itself...becomes sanctified."

Sister Janice points out that we should not be surprised that mystics and saints of Christian spirituality almost always experienced illness at some point in their lives...indeed fairly serious illness! She selects an excellent array of holy people, eleven in number, as examples. A key point is that Jesus has kept his promise which is found at the end of the Gospel of Matthew: "I am always with you to the end of the ages (28-20).

Who were the eleven chosen to be examples? Well the first one is a Lay Dominican, Blessed Margaret of Castello, who suffered multiple disabilities all of her life. Let me hold discussion and expand about her a little later. Then there was Julian of Norwich, an English woman and hermit who asked Jesus to let her suffer with him; not a usual request especially during the late 1300's when bubonic plague and famine were major issues. Another example was Catherine of Genoa, a 15th century model of a caregiver, revered to this day by the citizens of her native city "for her heroic devotion and service to its poor people during the plague of 1493."

In terms of temporary disability, the author selected Ignatius of Loyola, who became engaged in serious study of Christianity while recovering from a battle wound and a subsequent long convalescence. This "forced him to stop and take a look at his life." Indeed "he did not like what he saw; a vain young man of ill pursuits." Another was the "Lilly of the Mohawks" whose mother was a Catholic Iroquois captive of the Mohawks, and a challenge to the Iroquois-Mohawk world. With time, the Jesuits returned to the Mohawks and baptized her with the name of "Catherine" after Catherine of Siena...or Kateri Tekakwitha. She rose above the challenges of her life; orphaned, scarred, partially blind, and rejected by her tribe for her faith."

Therese of Lisieux is a perennial favorite for carrying pain in her life, dying at 24 years of age from tuberculosis. This Carmelite, although a cloistered nun, became a spiritual light in the 20th century partly because of the autobiography she was required to write... STORY OF A SOUL.

The book joyfully covers several more intriguing stories about pain, suffering and holiness. Consider Venerable Matt Talbot, born in Dublin, Ireland in 1856. His demon was alcoholism and he discovered God in addiction. An author, Philip Mayard has written a relevant book entitled TO SLAKE A THIRST, THE MATT TALBOT WAY TO SOBRIETY.

Among the most impactful of the eleven vignettes was that on Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. His excellent book about physical and mental challenges is simply called THE GIFT OF PEACE. Cardinal Bernardin was a native of South Carolina. He served as an auxiliary bishop for Atlanta, subsequently as Secretary General of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, then Archbishop of Cincinnati, and finally Archbishop of Chicago with ultimate elevation to the College of Cardinals.

In THE GIFT OF PEACE, Cardinal Bernardin spoke of being charged with sexually abusing a young man by the name of Steven Cook. Three months later, Cook, of his own volition, recanted the charges and dropped the suit. Realizing that Cook had been a "pawn" used by critics, Cardinal Bernardin met with Steven, who was suffering with AIDS. During that reconciliation, the Cardinal celebrated Mass for Cook and they parted "on good terms".

But even more impactful were the sections of the book on Bernardin's struggle with cancer...a disease that had been in remission but had now returned. He received the first copy of the book the day of his death; in it he focused on "death as a friend". This was an especially warm chapter. Cardinal Bernardin had been particularly helpful to others who suffered from cancer, often asked to pray for specific individuals and to provide advice. His own view of his cancer was that it was one of "God's special gifts". He showed us how to live with challenges and how to die in peace.

The theme of living with cancer is very well presented in the story about Sister Thea Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration. She was the granddaughter of a slave, was a teacher, activist and advocate for black Catholics in America. In a video, *ALMOST HOME; LIVING WITH SUFFERING AND DYING*, she clearly says "I intend to live until I die" where she focuses with grace and dignity about her journey home to the God of her love. She entered eternity on March 30, 1990.

The final story is about Father Pedro Arrupe, S.J., a Jesuit who was a Novice Master in Nagatsuka, Japan when the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima...long before he became the Superior General of the Society of Jesus. In later life he spent 10 years struggling with severe cerebral thrombosis. He helped many people face their crises, but he himself finally succumbed to a stroke. His favorite prayer was simply "Amen, Alleluia", meaning that he accepted God's will with enthusiasm. Surely this message is for us too!

But let me return to the Lay Dominican, Blessed Margaret of Castello. Her birth was a real shocker to her parents. Not only was she not the boy they had hoped for, she was short of stature, blind, and suffered from scoliosis, a curvature of the spine. Since her parents were of high society, Margaret was hidden away so no one would see her...specifically in a cell away from family. Ultimately she was abandoned, living in the streets of a nearby Italian town. She became a Mantellate...now called Lay Dominican. She is credited with a number of wondrous works among which was her praying for another Mantellate who was losing her sight because of an eye tumor. The eye was completely healed. The author also identifies other prayerful works as well. Margaret is an ideal companion for those suffering from multiple disabilities. She bore hers well and could easily be the "poster child" for the anti-abortion movement as well as the homeless people of our world.

The bottom line that Sister Janice McGrane brings out is precisely how do we begin to cultivate a friendship with someone among the Communion of Saints? She says in the same way we develop earthly relationships. First, get acquainted. Read the person's biography or books or commentaries about her or him. Next engage in prayerful conversation with this friend. Then Sister advises that we open the heart and listen closely for a response. Don't be afraid to use imagination to picture your Saint who can encourage or accompany you. Amen.

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