The uncanonized saints
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By Nathan Schneider

The Co-Cathedral of St. Joseph in Brooklyn, nearing the end of a long restoration[2], has a new mural over its main doors. Surrounding the Holy Spirit, in the form of an incandescent dove, is a gathering of women and men flanked by angels. Most have soft yellow halos, but three figures, including the pair closest to the dove, do not.

The three are local icons. Activist and writer Dorothy Day wears a hat with the inscription "NO WAR" and holds a stack of Catholic Worker newspapers, the publication she founded. Beside her is Bernard Quinn[3], a priest who served Brooklyn’s African American community at a church just blocks away, and whose Long Island orphanage was twice burned down by racists. Pierre Toussaint, who looks intently toward the dove, was a slave-turned-philanthropist who, on gaining his freedom in 1807, adopted his surname from the leader of the Haitian revolution.
Sunday, as Popes John XXIII and John Paul II receive their halos through the Vatican’s canonization process, [5] it may be especially hard to remember that not all saints have official halos. Nor does one have to be a world-famous pope to be a saint.

This double nod to the papacy honors two men who made a point of pushing the Catholic Church to be more universal — more at home in the world outside the Vatican gates. Both John XXII and John Paul II envisioned a church in which holiness lies not just in its hierarchy but in all of God’s people, Catholic and otherwise.

In 1962, Pope John XXIII propelled the church hierarchy into the Second Vatican Council [6], which challenged its members to reconsider some of their rusty habits [7] in light of the core of their faith. When the dust settled, the Mass was no longer in Latin, and the church was able to take a more conciliatory tone toward other religions. His encyclical Pacem in terris [8] made a hopeful call for peace at the height of the Cold War.

In the council’s wake, Pope John Paul II was a telegenic traveler who expertly personified a new kind of global Catholicism. Though he had little tolerance for dissent in the hierarchy, he represented a church made up of diverse cultures around the world and encouraged lay Catholics to experiment with new kinds of communities suited to modern life.

Pope Francis could almost be mistaken for canonizing himself. Like John XXIII, he was once a moderate cardinal who surprised the world as a reformer pope; like John Paul II, he plays the international media like a game of hopscotch.

But nearly everything else Pope Francis has done in the past year has sent a humbler message. He has filled his tenure with unprecedented gestures [10] toward the saintliness of people in less mighty stations than those he is elevating Sunday. He has washed the feet of a Muslim girl [11], vacated the lavish papal apartments and spread hope for a more welcoming church with the simple words, “Who am I to judge?”

Of course, such acts are only unprecedented if one forgets the example of Jesus himself, who always seemed to find the clearest expression of his teaching among the marginalized – the Samaritan who helped the suffering man whom a priest had avoided, the divorcée at the well.

The deluge of tributes to popes who served in the spotlight — men who did remarkable things but also made missteps — should not let us forget the saints in our midst, the saints who will come and go uncanonized.

With its peculiar quests for verified miracles [12], canonization is reserved for the minority of holy people whom the church deems safe for veneration. But this practice comes with the assumption that the actual population of saints is far larger. Most saints, Catholic tradition presumes, are never officially recognized as such.
The most basic, ancient creeds of the Catholic Church include “the communion of saints” — a mystical community that is synonymous with the true church. It is made up of souls, both living and dead, bound together in faith and divine grace. This communion is also a pool of shared resources, temporal and spiritual, that the saints treat not as their own possessions but as gifts from God. Rather than greedily accumulating holiness and blessings, a saint acts as a steward.

Church texts often describe the communion of saints in terms of its solidarity – “solidarity between heaven and earth,” Pope Francis has said. This is not merely some idyllic gathering of the haloed, but a society based in rigorous mutual support and mutual responsibility. Responsibility to the saints, living and dead, is incumbent even on a pope.

The Second Vatican Council adopted a controversial notion, suggested by the theologian Karl Rahner, that Christians should recognize a category of “anonymous Christians.” Pope John XXIII explained, “anyone who does not call himself a Christian but who really is so because he does good.”

While the phrase can sound condescending to non-Christians, the possibility of saints who aren’t Catholic gave the church a firmer basis for building ties with other religious traditions — and for sowing peace in a world on the brink of mutually assured destruction.

Then-CIA Director James McConе actually reprimanded Pope John XXIII for his efforts to foster dialogue between the Soviet Union and the United States. Yet the pope sent a communiqué to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev that helped diffuse the Cuban Missile Crisis. In his journal, Pope Paul XXIII was defiant: “I bless all peoples, and withhold my confidence from none.”

Three-quarters of a mile from St. Joseph in Brooklyn is Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church. Among the exquisite 19th-century Tiffany stained-glass windows are murals dating from the mid-1970s presenting people of various colors and walks of life in street clothes. This is as true a depiction of the communion of saints as a phalanx of halos. Among them are our family members, friends we’ve known and quarreled with for years, people we encounter in day-to-day life, those we don’t bother to notice.

Like commuters passing each other on a busy sidewalk, the communion of saints is, by and large, anonymous — even to the saints themselves.

PHOTO (TOP): Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis and Pope John XXIII (L to r) in a combination file photo. REUTERS/Patrick de Noirmont, Max Rossi and Stefano Rellandini

PHOTO (INSERT 1): Pope John Paul II kisses a baby before his weekly general audience at the Vatican November 28, 2001. REUTERS/Paolo Cocco

PHOTO (INSERT 2): Pope Francis blesses a child as he arrives at the S. Maria della Provvidenza church in Rome, during the Holy Thursday celebration, April 17, 2014. REUTERS/Tony Gentile

PHOTO (INSERT 3): Pope John XXIII. WIKIMEDIA/ Commons
PHOTO (INSERT 4): Pope John Paul II hugs Melissa Brent (L) and Justin Farinelli after they presented him with flowers at his airport arrival in Baltimore, October 8, 1995. REUTERS/Luciano Mellace

[7] challenged its members to reconsider some of their rusty habits: http://www.npr.org/2012/10/10/162573716/why-is-vatican-ii-so-important
[16] because he does good: http://sabbath.chez.com/Pages/Catholicisme/BETE/01.htm
[18] Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church: http://www.lapcbrooklyn.org/#!sanctuary/c1xh8

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