

I once turned down the opportunity to attend Mass with a saint. A real saint; canonised by the Church; and a Pope to boot. It was 1979 and I was in my final year as a student in the English College in Rome, completing my studies which would gain me a Licentiate in Sacred Theology. I had been ordained the previous year and returned to Rome in time to be in St Peter's Square when Karol Wojtyla stepped out onto the balcony of the Basilica after the words had been intoned, "*Habemus Papam*", we have a Pope and the first non-Italian Pontiff in over four hundred years announced himself as a man from a far country. He inaugurated a plan to have seminarians from the various colleges attend Mass with him each morning and so, in due course, the turn of the *Venerabile* came, and it was a Thursday. Now Thursdays were our *gita*-days; a day off a chance for a *gita* (a trip) out of Rome to the countryside for a nourishing walk and appetising lunch. But that was not my alternative attraction. I was a priest and had been asked to be chaplain to a primary school of international children and my day for visiting was Thursday. It involved a pleasant walk along the Tiber to the *Ara Pacis*, Emperor Augustus' Altar to Peace, celebrating his achievement and a bus ride up the *Via Cassia* to the school, where I celebrated Mass with one class and visited another and had a hearty lunch in solitude (bliss) and came home. Ever diligent in my responsibilities I was not going to have a Pope, even a Polish one, interrupt and so I caught the bus while my confrères went to the Vatican. Thus I missed the chance to say I had met a proper saint.

St John Paul II made more saints than anyone else in history so I suppose he would have had a ready welcome at the Gates of Heaven.

As a consequence, and owing to events since his death, there are many people alive today who have known a saint, or several. Some still alive will have met: John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, Mother Theresa, Padre Pio, Sr Faustina, all saints in very recent memory.

It is a recent phenomenon to canonise the recently dead. John Bosco, the priest who looked after the street-kids of Milan, was an example in the early twentieth century, and Francis of Assisi was canonised (by the Pope who had made the law that only Popes can canonise, Innocent III) just two years after his death. But a general, sensible rule was that we let history decide who made significant, outstanding, holy impact on the world and so is an exemplar for us all.

I think that is a good rule. But I recognise that having saints acknowledged as saints in living memory does highlight the very significant truth that there are saints in our world, indeed saints all around us.

Do not those doctors and nurses who are going to Sierra Leone and other places of Ebola-danger show heroic virtue. (On the *Today* Programme on Radio 4 there is an

audio diary being broadcast made by a nurse, Geraldine O'Hara, who has gone out there. On Wednesday she told the story of a mother losing her 6 or 7 year old child and her brief farewell to him. A few hours later she was nursing an orphan child. The nurse gasped in her astonishment at the resilience and love human kind can reveal.)

I know I have known lots of saints, some now with the Lord, others still with us. I have in the past mentioned Harold and Sylvia, our neighbours as we grew up in Leeds, whose first and only child was severely mentally handicapped; but no child has ever been more loved. She lived into her twenties and I conducted her (Anglican) funeral. Both parents devoted themselves to helping disadvantaged children here and abroad, opening their home to many. Adversity can crush or it can be the catalyst to amazing flourishing, which is surely a sign of sainthood.

One of my students from the seminary in South Africa is a remarkable man. Afrikaans by birth, he turned from his own people (but not his family) to embrace pacifism and, as a consequence of refusing to join the army in national service, had to serve five years in the police force. One time called out to a riot he was issued with a handgun which he promptly rendered useless for its purpose (and so left himself unarmed, but he was not going to shoot anyone by accident or design) and went to try and talk olive branches to the rioters. As a priest he has done outstanding work among the poor of Mannenburg township (one of the most violent areas on the Cape Flats) and continues to over-see an after hours project for school children which keeps over two hundred kids off the streets, and fed, and learning, dance, an instrument, to paint. We support that in a small way through the Cape Flats Fund. He is also deeply spiritual, a much sought confessor, and a writer of beautiful prose in both Afrikaans and English.

We all know the violence of South Africa and its many problems (the captain of the national soccer team was shot and killed last week, one of so many massacred each week) but it is also a land of saints.

I could give so many examples there and here, but you can add to the stories yourselves. We all know saints. They will not be canonised and officially acknowledged but saints they are; we celebrate them today.

If I missed a chance to be at Mass with one, I break bread with many others, often.