

Four Saints That Will Change Your Life By Tom Perna

Today I want to briefly speak about a wife and a mother, a husband and a father, a spiritual father and a great master of the young, and a religious mother who was a reformer and is known as the Doctor of Prayer. All four of these saints, by living their lives sacramentally and viewing the world through the lens of the Church, were able with God's grace to bring many souls to heaven and continue to do so even today.

St. Teresa of Avila, known as the Doctor of Prayer, she was born on March 28th, 1515. At a very young age she loved reading about the lives of the saints with her younger brother. They both loved the martyrs so much that they left in secret at the young age of 7 to go to the land of the Moors to die for their faith and to die for Jesus Christ. However, before they could get there, their uncle met them and brought them home to a very upset mother.

You'll notice with the saints, and it's a beautiful thing to do for even us, is reading the lives of the saints. So many of the saints that are now canonized read about the lives of the saints before them. St. Teresa is obviously one of them. Another one that comes to mind for me is St. Ignatius of Loyola. Now, you look at the lives of the saints and he's in there but he also read the saint's lives before him. That's the beauty of the saints, they are our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ and they are our examples that we ask for intercession and prayer to.

At first, she wanted to enter religious life and her father was against it. After entering religious life she became very sick and her father decided to bring her home. Although she prayed when she was struggling in health, she did not pray when she was healed. She wanted something, was healed, received it but didn't give thanksgiving. Does that sound familiar to us?

On different occasions she had encounters with Our Lord. Now, we're into her religious life and she goes back into religious life and starts to have these encounters with Our Lord. But, fearing what these mean, she kept a lot of these visions in secret. The heavenly conversations purified her soul and gave her a humble heart.

After being a Carmelite nun for nearly 25 years St. Teresa took on her greatest challenge yet. The Carmelites had lost their great austerity and enthusiasm by the late 16th century. At this time she began her reform of the Carmelites and founded the Discalced Carmelites the "shoe-less" Carmelites. Although her movement to

reform the Carmelite order was approved by church officials, she was met with opposition from her fellow nuns, the nobility, the magistrates and the people of Avila.

This was a gut-wrenching reforming that she did because so many of the religious sisters had gotten comfortable in a certain lifestyle. And so, she felt that they were not reaching their primary mission with the Carmelite mission. So, she goes and forms this new aspect of the Carmelites.

St. Teresa of Avila received many great talents from God. She had a calm and beautiful personality that resounded from the tenderness of her heart. She had a great understanding of people and how they interacted with one another. She had a mature wit and intelligence that was known by many. When choosing novices for her convent she wanted them first to have intelligence and good judgement. Although piety was important she believed that could be trained.

St. Teresa of Avila has left us many great books, “The Interior Castle”, “The Way of Perfection”, the book of her life (autobiography) and “Foundations” (which is a guide on how to live religious life for her nuns and many others). These are great books to read at any time but specifically during the Lenten season because there is a penitential nature to her writings.

I will say that her writings are a little difficult because there is a circular nature to her writings so you gotta find a good translation. But, last year during Lent, I read some of her writings and it changed the way I looked at prayer.

On October 4th, 1582 St. Teresa of Avila entered heavenly glory. In 1622 Pope Gregory XV canonized her Saint of the Church and in 1970 she was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI. A quote I have for you from her Book of Life, chapter 2 it says,

“If I should give advice, I would tell parents that when their children are at this age [that’s the teenage age] they ought to be very careful about whom their children associate with. For here lies the root of great evil since our natural bend is towards the worst rather than toward the best.”

Our second saint that we are going to discuss today is St. John Bosco. One of my fan favorites I taught at St. Dominic Savio in Austin, Texas. And St. John Bosco was the teacher of St. Dominic Savio. St. John Bosco also known as Don Bosco was

born in 1815 and was raised by his saintly mother, Margaret. She would play an integral role through his entire life.

From an early age Don Bosco knew what his vocation would be even though others made fun of him. He knew from early childhood that he wanted to be a priest and his peers made fun of him because he wanted to be a priest but he was always set on being a priest. Usually when you know at a young age (people I know that are priests and religious that receive this calling at a young age) there's a good shot that you're going to be a priest or religious because it comes at such a young age.

It was at the age of 16 that John (Don Bosco) entered seminary with really nothing but the clothes on his back which were provided by the people in his town. He wanted to be a missionary in a foreign land but St. Joseph Cafasso, a superior at this time in his life, told him to unpack his trunk and go and continue to work with the poor boys of the city. Don Cafasso said,

“That and nothing else is God’s will for you.”

As his priestly ministry grew, so did his flock continue to grow from the original 30 and 40 boys that he worked with. He opened up a tailor shop, a printing press and other workshops for the boys to work in. He also taught classes on grammar and Latin. He asked St. Francis de Sales to be his intercessor. By 1856 he had 150 boys under his care. Now, just so you know, St. Francis de Sales [was] also a teacher.

He is known as the master with the youth. He was very patient even with the toughest and hardest boys. Many young priests came and went because they could not master the ability to speak and teach these young boys. But Don Bosco could.

In 1859 with 22 companions, Don Bosco founded a religious congregation named the Salesians. It was named after his patron and fellow teacher St. Francis de Sales. Within 4 years of the founding there were 39 Salesians. At Don Bosco’s death there were 768 Salesians.

During his life Don Bosco had a great devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Especially under her title “Our Lady Help of Christians”. Don Bosco was a master builder as well. He built quite a few churches in his time and often asked the Blessed Mother for guidance and prayers under his favorite title. As desperate as times were, when corners were tight, the financial support that he needed always came though.

On January 31st 1888, which is his feast day, he died a joyful and beautiful death. 40,000 people viewed his body at his death. You can still view his body in Turin, Italy. He is one of the incorruptible saints. He was canonized a saint in 1934. I was blessed enough in 2000 for World Youth Day, we went to Turin and I was able to see his body. It still looks like his body the day they laid him to rest.

A few of his saying are, to parents he says this,

“Without confidence and love there can be no true education. If you want to be loved, you must love yourselves and make your children feel that you love them.”

And to the youth under his care he would say,

“Run, jump, have all the fun you want at the right time. But, for heaven’s sake, do not commit a sin.”

The third saint that we’re going to look at is Blessed Karl of Austria.

Blessed Karl of Austria was born on August 17th, 1887 in the country of Austria. Karl’s childhood is simple and wholesome. He is tutored and attends school in Vienna. He is taught the Catholic faith and loves to practice it. He becomes known as a kind and compassionate child who performs various chores and tasks in an effort to give to the poor and buy gifts for those around him.

At the age of 16 Karl was then commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Imperial army. He is known as an intelligent and thoughtful young man, someone who is loyal and dependable. He is an inspiration to his fellow soldiers and works his way up the ranks earning various promotions.

After courting his girl Zita, who he met through family members, Karl takes her to the marian shrine of Mariazell where he proposes to her in front of the Blessed Sacrament and places their engagement under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

On the eve of their wedding, Karl tells his bride,

“Now we must help each other get to Heaven.”

Their union is blessed with 8 children. Their family and their devotion to God are their first priorities. And they truly live a simple, quiet life while Karl continues his military career.

On June 28th, 1914 word is sent from Sarajevo that the Heir Apparent, Archduke Ferdinand is assassinated making Karl the new Heir Apparent and changing his life forever. For those of you that are familiar with WWII, this is the beginning of WWII.

For Karl, the culture he bears is Christianity. And in the face of being in a war he considers the war itself immoral. He insists that he and the army will act morally. On November 30th, 1916, he is made Emperor and he faces many challenges but he answers these many challenges in a saint-like way.

Civilly he organizes soup kitchens, uses the palaces horses and carriages to deliver coal to his people. He fights against usury and corruption and gives away his personal wealth distributing alms beyond his means. He is the first world leader to establish a ministry of social welfare.

Spiritually Emperor Karl shares in the same privations of his people and orders the palace to observe food rationing and smaller portions. He invokes the name of God in all decrees and governmental acts. He creates a Catholic press and plans the building of more churches in Vienna to serve the growing needs of the faithful.

Once the war ends, he was asked to give up his throne but he refuses stating that his crown is a sacred trust from God and he will never betray God, his subjects or his dynastic inheritance. At this point Karl is then banished and exiled.

When he realizes that he is dying at a very young age he calls his son (also known as Archduke Otto) to his bedside to say goodbye and to show him,

“How a Catholic and an Emperor conducts himself when dying.”

Blessed Karl of Austria is still not a canonized saint he was beatified by Pope John-Paul II. Now, there is a great connection between Pope John-Paul II and Karl of Austria. J-P II's dad served in the military that Karl was Emperor and commander of. John-Paul II's father had such a great love and devotion to Karl of Austria that he named his youngest son, “Karol” (Karl in the Polish language). He named his son, “Karol” who would become Pope St. John-Paul II after Karl of Austria. And then, by God's providence alone, John-Paul II ends up beatifying Karl of Austria.

The fourth saint and the last saint we are going to discuss is St. Gianna Beretta Molla, another fan favorite of mine.

Gianna Beretta was born on October 4th 1922, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, in Magenta Italy outside of Milan. She was one of 13 children. Gianna received her First Holy Communion on April 4th, 1928 and in 1930 she received her Confirmation. Even though she was very young when she received her First Holy Communion she went to mass with her mama. She attended daily mass her entire life.

During her 5th year of secondary school she went on a Jesuit retreat. It is here that the growth in her spiritual life began to go deeper. This is more than likely the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. If you've never done a retreat that goes over these spiritual exercises, I would say do one immediately. It's beautiful! I went on a silent retreat last summer for the first time and it was a beautiful 48 hours. By the time the 48 hours were over I needed more time to spend in prayer.

Back to St. Gianna. By walking through the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola she began to open her life to Christ and the Blessed Mother seeking to do the will of God for her life. She wished to offer everything to Jesus both sufferings and joys. To die rather than commit serious sin and to pray. During her time away from school she joined, following her mother's example, the young girls of Catholic Action. In her own words Gianna said,

“I make the holy resolution to do everything for Jesus. All my works. All my disappointments. I offer everything to Him.”

St. Gianna along with her husband Pietro are exceptional examples of friendship, self sacrificial love and holiness. In an age, in this modern culture in which we live, that seeks to destroy sacrificial love and the beauty of marriage between a man and a woman. This couple is a shining light of God's grace and holiness that everyone either married or single should see as the perfect example of what it is to love another before yourself.

As they were courting (and I'll kinda read here in a second how Pietro first meets her) they wrote letters. They wrote these love letters back and forth to each other. Beautiful love letters. An art form that has been lost with e-mail and specifically text messaging. Pietro writes this to her, he says, this is actually in a biography that he writes. He says,

“I saw Gianna for the first time in 1950.” Later he says he remembers meeting her in 1949. “I was attracted to her. At dinner we sat opposite of each other. From then on I managed to find opportunities for us to meet.”

In her first letter to him she said,

“I want to make you happy and be what you desire; kind understanding and ready for the sacrifices that life will require. Now you are here whom I love and I intend to give myself to you to form a truly Christian family.”

On September 24th, 1955 they were married in front of family and friends. They knelt before God promising to be faithful and to love one another for better or for worse. Even though Pietro worked full-time and Gianna operated a demanding medical practice the couple had four children. However, in the end, the fourth child would also take the life of St. Gianna.

During the pregnancy of her fourth child a tumor developed on her uterus. She was advised to have an abortion to save her life. But instead she said,

“Choose the life of the child.”

Being a doctor herself she was fully aware of the dangers of her life but chose the child’s life over her own. She said,

“If it comes down to saving a life, save the child’s life before mine.”

After giving birth to her fourth child, “Gianna Emanuela” she had an attack and went into a coma. However, she did come out of it. After waking from the first coma (the second she would never wake) she said to her husband,

“Pietro, I was already there. And do you know what I saw? They sent me down here to suffer still because it is not right to come to the Lord without enough suffering.”

A few days after giving birth to her fourth child she passed into eternal glory. St. Gianna Beretta Molla entered heavenly glory on April 28th, 1962. Pope St. John-Paul II beatified her and canonized her a saint in 2004.

So, what do we take from these two sisters and two brothers of ours in the Christian faith?

First, from St. Teresa of Avila, we take endurance, faith and trusting in God. And having the great zeal for the Lord, humility and especially prayer.

St. John Bosco -- he teaches us patience, love of children and we are all called to be missionaries even if we are not missionaries across the world. We can be missionaries in the world in which we live right here.

Blessed Karl of Austria — we learn how to live a life of virtue, what it means to be a Catholic man and a Catholic woman of faith, how to place others before oneself and understanding the dignity of the human person.

And Lastly, St. Gianna Beretta — we learn friendship, self sacrifice, love of spouse and children and complete undying holiness.

I hope you guys have listened to these lives of the saints and taken them to heart. I've given you a short explanation of their lives. I encourage you to read their lives and many more lives of the saints during this time of Lent.

Thank you and God bless.