

POCKET GUIDE

— TO —

SAINTHOOD



**A FIELD
MANUAL
FOR THE
SUPER-
VIRTUOUS
LIFE**

JASON BOYETT

Author of **POCKET GUIDE TO THE BIBLE**

PRAISE FOR POCKET GUIDE TO SAINTHOOD

“Hewing to his trademark theology-by-way-of-Jon-Stewart model, Jason Boyett’s hilarious, fact-packed collection of Pocket Guides refresh the maxim, if you’re not careful, you might just learn something. Anyone with a curiosity about history and belief—and an ear for wry irreverence—should not miss out on these pithy, delightful volumes.” —Lauren Sandler, author, *Righteous: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement*

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Jason Boyett

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Introduction



At various times on eBay, sellers have opened auctions on collectible items related to particular saints. Over the past few months you could have bid on a medallion supposedly touched by Elizabeth Anne Seton, the first native-born American to attain sainthood. You could have won a glass locket containing an authentic piece of Pope Leo XIII's collar or four strands of St. John Bosco's hair ("a rare first-class relic"). You could even purchase a piece of cloth (with gift box!) that touched a true relic of St. Dymphna. Yes, apparently there's a decent market for scraps of fabric that may have once come into contact with a theoretical relic belonging to a seventh-century Irish saint who may or may not have ever existed.

People, it seems, are fascinated by the saints. We name our cities, hospitals, and churches after them. We wear medals with their pictures on them. We pray to them when we need help with something. We purchase pocket-sized books about them.¹

Why? Maybe it's because some of them seemed to have been a lot like us. St. Crispin was a humble shoemaker in third-century Rome. St. Zita was just a poor housekeeper in thirteenth-century Italy. St. Bernadette was just a teenage girl strolling

1. Thanks for that.

through a forest near Lourdes, France, in 1858, until the Blessed Virgin Mary showed up, resulting in a shrine now visited by five million Catholics every year. There have been male saints and female saints, impoverished saints and royal saints, saints of noteworthy intelligence and saints of hardly any intelligence at all (St. Joseph of Cupertino). Some saints were holy from a young age. Others didn't even convert to Christianity until adulthood. Sure, a few of them were crazy-eyed mystics living naked in the desert (St. Mary of Egypt), but many saints were well-adjusted members of society, with responsibilities and families and quiet, productive lives. And while the majority of saints have been of European origin, there are also saints with Asian, African, and even multiracial backgrounds (St. Martin de Porres).

On the other hand, maybe we love the saints because they're so *not* like us. Who among us, after all, has ever been beheaded, only to pick up our severed head, walk a couple miles down the road, and deliver a well-composed sermon (St. Denis)? Who among us has rescued a damsel from a dragon (St. George) or carried the Baby Jesus across a river (St. Christopher)? Indeed, who among us has helped prostitutes find meaningful work by instructing them in the lacemaking trade (St. John Francis Regis)?

Today, our spiritual leaders don't generally get martyred in horrific ways, or perform miraculous healings, or bleed mystically from the hands and feet, or tame wild beasts, or whip themselves bloody, or care for lepers on the streets of Calcutta, or levitate during mass. No, compared to the saints, religious people in the twenty-first century are pretty normal—even the ones on those weird Christian television networks.²

2. The *Pocket Guide's* talking to you, purple-haired lady on Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN).

Nevertheless, we are intrigued by the saints. Whether we're Catholics desperately needing a patron or Protestants trying to identify their cabbie's bobblehead (probably St. Fiacre), we could all use a little more information about these holy people. As long as that information is not too boring. Because the saints were a lot of things, but they were never boring.

So let us turn our attention to the subject of sainthood. Let us consider the saints of Christian history. After all, they inspire us to be better people. They motivate us to do greater things. And they let us know, once and for all, that it's entirely possible to sail across the Irish Sea on a leaf (St. Ia).

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to

SAINTHOOD





There Should Have Been a St. Webster

(A Glossary of Terms)

When it comes to generalized information, people are pretty familiar with the saints of Christian history. St. Francis? The guy with the birds. St. Anthony of Padua? The one you dial up when you lose your wallet. St. Florian? Patron saint of soap-boilers. Pretty basic stuff.

But when it comes to the specifics of sainthood—the nitty-gritty details of the saints’ lives and teachings and devotional peculiarities—well, things can get confusing in a holy jiffy. What’s the difference between a **Dominican** and a **Franciscan**? Is **beatification** a good thing? Isn’t a **Carmelite** one of those crunchy little candy treats you mix into ice cream?

Good questions. Clearly, sainthood is a complicated subject, saturated with cryptic terms and churchy phrases and old-fashioned words that, let's face it, probably contain way more letters than are necessary to get the point across (**concupiscense**, the *Pocket Guide* is totally on to you). Sure, the guys wearing the vestments probably know what it all means, but what about the regular folks? What about the common, mass-attending, rosary-praying Catholics? For the love of Little Benedict the Bridge-Builder,¹ what about those poor, sad Protestants who don't know a **mendicant** from a **mystic**?

The *Pocket Guide* is here to help. To minimize confusion and maximize your reading pleasure, this book kicks off with a handy glossary of saint-related terms. These are the words and phrases you need to know to fully appreciate the pages to come. So button up those **hair shirts**, kids, and let's get pious!



ANCHORITE

A special kind of **hermit** who dedicated himself or herself (in which case she was called an *anchoress*) to a life of solitude, prayer, and **asceticism**. But instead of living in caves or the desert, anchorites preferred cozier confines: they walled themselves into a wee little room attached to a local church. Once the cell was ready, the anchorite would enter it in a somber ceremony—*somber* does seem like an accurate way to describe it—and the local bishop would then permanently brick up the door, sealing the man or woman inside. Afterwards, the anchorite's only exposure to the outside world would be through a small window for the passage of food and water.

The renowned fourteenth-century devotional writer, Julian of Norwich, was an anchoress. She was also quite pasty.

1. A twelfth-century French shepherd and saint of minor consequence, used here only because of the awesome nickname.

PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE OR TWO: Known for their great spirituality and wisdom, anchorites often dispensed advice through their tiny windows. Because if there's anyone who ought to be telling you how to get along in the world, it's someone who has willingly reduced their world to a closet.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED
WITH: *Hermits*, otherwise known as free-range anchorites.



ASCETIC

A religious person who voluntarily gives up worldly pursuits out of spiritual motives. By the third and fourth centuries, a few countercultural Christians started thinking the whole following-Jesus thing had become too easy, especially in the cities, so they abandoned modern conveniences and started hanging out in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine. These **hermits** generally combined self-denial—in the form of sexual abstinence, fasting, and avoidance of any of life's comforts—with intense prayer and meditation on the Scriptures. It was spectacular! Out in the desert, they were no longer

FUN RELATED FACT

The *Ancren Riwle*, a thirteenth-century manual for anchoresses, lists eight reasons to retire from the world. These include everything from security issues ("If a raging lion were running along the street, would not a wise person shut herself in?")² to protecting one's virginity ("... this precious balsam in this brittle vessel is virginity ... more brittle than any glass; which, if ye were in the world's crowd, ye might ... lose entirely").³ It's quite convincing.



2. *The Ancren Riwle: A Treatise on the Rules and Duties of Monastic Life*, James Morton, B.D., trans. (Camden Society, London: 1853), p. 165.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

tempted by societal evils like companionship or the lack of sand. Nope. It was just them and God. And scorpions. And, um, all the other hermits, because asceticism got really popular. Eventually, all the ascetics organized into clubs and monasticism was born.

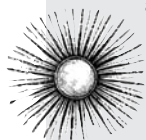
See also: *Hermit*.

PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE: When Chip stopped wearing his Bluetooth headset I thought he was becoming all ascetic and stuff,

but it turns out he just had an ear infection.

FUN RELATED FACT

The sixth-century ascetic St. Emilianus spent so much time kneeling in prayer that her calloused elbows and knees were said to have felt as hard as “the hide of a camel.”⁴



NOT TO BE CONFUSED

WITH: *Aesthetics*. Because you totally don’t want a third-century hermit lecturing you on the *feng shui* of your living-room furniture.



BEATIFICATION

The next-to-last step in the process of getting that coveted “St.” in front of your name. Beatification is something the pope does to officially recognize that a certain person (1) is dead, (2) has gotten into heaven, and (3) gets to participate in the intercession of saints—that is, the beatified dead person is allowed to use his or her heavenly clout to ask God for stuff on behalf of those of us who aren’t dead yet. Or holy enough. Or a combination thereof. (See **Communion of Saints**.)

According to **Canon Law**, beatification isn’t allowed until the saint-to-be is credited with at least one **miracle**, which means

4. Baring-Gould, Rev. S. *The Lives of the Saints* (London: John Hodges, 1877), p. 273.

someone praying in the person's name or visiting the person's grave or riding in a taxi with the person's bobblehead on the dash has to get healed or experience something that is spiritually significant and unexplainable. This condition doesn't apply, however, if the saint-to-be died a **martyr**. Martyrdom requires no miracle at all. On the road to canonization, martyrdom is the HOV lane.

PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE OR TWO: Pope John Paul II was a beatification machine, giving that honor to 1,340 people during his reign. Which is one way to make sure your "Welcome to Heaven" party is well-attended.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: *Beatty-fication*, which is the process of adding a Beatty (preferably Warren, though Ned will do in a pinch) to one's motion picture in order to increase its box-office appeal. Though a popular term in the '80s and early '90s, Beatty-fication is hardly remembered, much less practiced, in today's cinema culture.



BENEDICTINE

A member of the religious order founded by St. Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century. Benedictines live according to the Rule of St. Benedict, a highly influential document detailing the ins and outs of monastic life. How influential was it? Until the eleventh century, almost all monks and nuns were Benedictines, until a few competing orders like the **Carmelites**, **Dominicans**, and **Franciscans** began to crop up. Life as a Benedictine was devoted to prayer, scholarship, and charity, and members were required to take vows of poverty, **chastity**, and obedience.

Until the late nineteenth century, Benedictine communities were independent of each other. Now they're organized into a confederation called the Order of Saint Benedict, and Benedictines identify

themselves by placing the initials O.S.B. after their names. They take great care not to transpose those letters, as it can have disastrous (yet hilarious) results.

PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE: Kenny was fully prepared to take his Benedictine vow until he got to the part about living at St. Meinrad until death, and he wasn't sure he could do without World of Warcraft for that long.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: *Benediction*, a short blessing or prayer at the end of a church service. You might think the word is related to St. Benedict, but it's not. Both the word and the name come from the Latin words *bene* (well) and *dicere* (to speak). And, for the record, the decadent breakfast dish Eggs Benedict isn't named after the saint either. Its nomenclature comes from the last name of the person who first developed the recipe, probably in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.⁵



CANON LAW

The extensive legal system of the Roman Catholic Church, complete with courts, judges, lawyers, and dusty rooms full of thick, ancient books. It involves a lot of different categories of rules, which include (but aren't limited to) regulations pertaining to Church authorities, the rights and duties of Church members, and the step-by-step process of attaining sainthood. In the mid-thirteenth century, the Church realized its collection of laws was becoming unwieldy, so authorities set about the task of organizing them into a final

5. There are at least three different origin stories for Eggs Benedict, all involving different people with the last name of Benedict. And though interesting, they are essentially unrelated to the topic of sainthood, so you'll just have to look them up on your own.

document. This process was completed nearly six hundred years later, in 1917, with the publication of *Codex Juris Canonici* (“Code of Canon Law”). Apparently some deadlines were missed.

PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE: When the professor began his lecture with the phrase, “In accordance with canon 361.5 of the Code of Canon Law . . .” at least four students plunged immediately into a catatonic state.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: *Jude Law*. While a recognized authority on certain matters involving movie stardom, Academy Award nominations, and relationships with beautiful women, Mr. Law carries very little clout, if any, within the Vatican’s judicial system.



CANONIZATION

The formal process by which a regular person with a pious résumé morphs into a full-fledged saint. The upside? You get added to the long list (or “canon”) of official saints, and you get special influence when it comes to bringing prayers to the throne of God. The downside? People won’t leave your gravesite alone.

The canonization process (detailed exhaustively in Chapter 5) culminates in a decision by the pope, who has the final authority to declare someone a saint. It should be noted, of course, that canonization doesn’t exactly *make* a person a saint. It only recognizes the fact that someone *was already* a saint. Which means there are some pre-canonization saints just walking around and going to church and shopping at Home Depot—and they don’t even know how special they are! It’s all very optimistic and up-with-people-ish. Except for the part about Home Depot.

PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE: Ever the scrapbooker, Darla spent most of the last decade preparing a binder in bold anticipation of her own canonization, complete with church attendance records,

photographic demonstrations of heroic virtues, and blood samples from what she claimed was a case of **stigmata** but what was really a case of carelessness while slicing a bagel.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: *Ionization*, the process of changing a molecule into an ion by adding or subtracting electrons. Ionization is totally different from the sainthood thing because it actually *transforms* an atom into an ion rather than just lamely *recognizing* that it's already an ion. Or, you know, whatever.



CARMELITE

A member of the religious order founded in the twelfth century on Mount Carmel in Israel. Its founder may have been St. Bertold, a former Crusader who got disillusioned with crusading after he had a vision in which Jesus was less than delighted by all the forced conversions. But Bertold's connection to the order's founding is only traditional. When asked about their founder, early Carmelites would attribute the order's origins to Elijah or the Virgin Mary, which was *so* not very helpful. Even today, no one really knows where the Carmelites came from. Except Jesus, and apparently he has declined comment.

Officially, the Carmelite order is known as the Order of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Its monks and nuns are strongly devoted to Mary and focus on contemplative (and occasionally mystical) prayer. Back in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there were a succession of reforms among Carmelite communities that involved a level of piety tied very closely to whether its nuns or monks could wear shoes. Calced Carmelites wore shoes. Discalced Carmelites went barefoot. The turf wars were brutal.⁶

6. For more about these reforms, read the biographical entries, in Chapter 3, on St. John of the Cross (p. 84) and St. Teresa of Ávila (p. 100).

PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE: People grew less convinced about Jessica's desire to become a Carmelite nun when she revealed that the discalced Carmelites were her preference because she loved pedicures, and that kind of life required a *lot* of them.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: *Carmel-by-the-Sea*, a California community of writers, poets, and painters, where you'll find plenty of people walking around barefoot and having visions. But rarely is Jesus involved.



CHASTITY

Most commonly, the abstention from sex and the pursuit of purity for religious reasons, or as part of a religious vow. Chastity is one of the Seven Holy Virtues in Catholicism, along with temperance, charity, diligence, kindness, patience, and humility.

PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE: In what was either an act of unbridled optimism or a sad commentary on her vocabulary skills, teenage mom Heather gave her newborn daughter—her third child since making that virginity pledge as a fourteen-year-old at youth camp—the name Chastity.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: *Chastity belt*, the intricate, locked medieval device intended to prevent medieval hanky-panky. It was discovered to be much more effective than simply naming a girl Chastity.

FUN RELATED FACT

In the seventh century, St. Bertilia married the love of her life. Then she and her groom took vows of chastity and remained virgins until they died. True love waits. And waits.

