

POCKET GUIDE

— TO —

SAINTHOOD



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

JASON BOYETT

Author of **POCKET GUIDE TO THE BIBLE**

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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*

“Here’s a writer with insight like a finger in the eye, but you later want to thank him for that finger in the eye. If there were a Pocket Guide to Jason Boyett, it would include words like Fearless, Deep, and Snarky. And did I mention funny? Oh my goodness this guy is funny.”

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“The Pocket Guides are more fun than a plague of frogs, more satisfying than manna from heaven and way less

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*—Daniel Radosh, author, Rapture Ready! Adventures in
the
Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture*

Other Books by Jason Boyett

Pocket Guide to the Bible

Pocket Guide to the Afterlife

Pocket Guide to the Apocalypse



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to
SAINTHOOD



THE FIELD MANUAL
FOR THE
SUPER-VIRTUOUS
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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 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

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).





1

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?