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Saints and today's church

Richard McBrien | Jan. 25, 2010 Essays in Theology

This coming Saturday, Jan. 30, is the day of death of one of the 20th century's spiritual giants. He has never been canonized, however, nor even put on the canonical track leading to canonization.

This individual, though not a Christian, was, in the literal meaning of the word, a martyr (or "witness") for peace and reconciliation. He was a Hindu holy man and modern pioneer of non-violent resistance, who inspired many others, including the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., to follow this same path against all odds.

His name is Mohandas Gandhi, who was assassinated in 1948 by a young Hindu fanatic.

An apostolic delegate to the United States once praised Gandhi as a "naturally Christian" person. To be sure, the Vatican's representative intended his remark as a compliment to Gandhi, but in fact it was not.

The assumption was, and still is, among many Christians that only Christians can live a highly moral, even saintly, life. Whatever is good and holy in the world must be claimed somehow by the church.

All else is a form of "anonymous Christianity," one of the few insights of the great theologian Jesuit Fr. Karl Rahner that happily never caught on.

If Gandhi's life taught us anything, it is that God's presence, which is the basis of all holiness, is not limited to any religious community, including the church.

God is the loving Creator and Redeemer of all humanity. The Holy Spirit blows wherever the Spirit wills. Grace is offered to everyone.

Jan. 30 also marks the entrance into eternal glory of Joseph Columba Marmion, the Irish-born abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Maredsous in Belgium from 1901 until his death in 1923.

Abbot Marmion was one of the most influential spiritual writers and spiritual directors of the early 20th century. His was a Catholic spirituality that was well ahead of its time, rooted in the Bible and the liturgy of the Church and centered on the mystery of Christ.

Marmion's major works included *Christ: the Life of the Soul* and *Christ in His Mysteries*. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II on Sept. 3, 2000, the same day on which Pope John XXIII was also beatified.

On Jan. 31, the church celebrates the feast of John Bosco, who died in 1888 and who is best known for his pastoral and educational work with boys and young men. Today, unfortunately, his special ministry to boys might have raised suspicions about him, so much have the times changed because of the sex-abuse scandal in the priesthood.

Don Bosco was the founder of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, more commonly known as the Salesian order.

It is a religious community that some would say has exercised a significant, even excessive, influence in the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

The current Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, is a Salesian. He was formerly then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's number-two man in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. When Bertone left to become archbishop of Genoa, Cardinal Ratzinger named another Salesian, Archbishop Angelo Amato, to replace him.

There have been in recent years at least seven Salesian cardinals, including Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras, known for his progressive views on social justice issues and much talked about as a possible Third-World candidate for the papacy in 2005. But he was also a controversial figure for having denounced the U.S. media's focus on the sexual-abuse scandal in the Catholic priesthood.

There are also some 116 Salesian bishops -- far more than any other religious order in the church. In addition, 15 Salesians occupy policy-level Vatican positions and 24 others serve as consultors or as members of various Vatican academies and commissions.

In 2004 Pope John Paul II broke with a centuries-old tradition and appointed a woman, a Salesian nun, as under-secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life -- the same Congregation that is currently conducting a "visitation" of U.S. religious communities of women.

According to reports, some 40,000 mourners filed past Don Bosco's body as it lay in state, and it was said that virtually the whole population of Turin lined the streets of the city as the funeral cortege passed.

On a lighter note, Feb. 1 is the feast of Brigid of Kildare, one of the patron saints of Ireland. Among her legendary, and stereotypically Irish, exploits were distributing butter (a sign of prosperity in Irish culture) to the poor and changing bathwater into beer to satisfy the thirst of priests who were visiting her monastery.

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