

St. Therese of Lisieux

Doctor of the Church (1873–1897)

*"I am only a very little soul,
who can only offer very little things to our Lord."*

The story of St. Therese is lacking in outward drama. She was born in 1873 to a middle-class family in Lisieux, a small town in Normandy. Her mother died when she was four, and Therese and her four older sisters were left in the care of their father, a watchmaker and a man of marked piety. Therese, it seems, was his favorite child. When she was fifteen she received a special dispensation (in light of her young age) to enter the Carmelite convent of Lisieux, where two of her sisters had already preceded her. The rest of her short life was spent within the cloister of this obscure convent. She died of tuberculosis on September 30, 1897, at the age of twenty-four. It might be supposed that the memory of such a short and uneventful life would remain within the walls of the convent. Instead, her name quickly circled the globe. In response to popular acclamation, her canonization was processed with remarkable speed. She was declared a saint in 1925. Her feast is on October 1.

What lay behind these developments was the posthumous publication of her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, in which she described her experience and her distinctive insights into the spiritual life. It is a book that might well have been subtitled "The Making of a Saint," for essentially it is about the path to holiness in everyday life. Despite the somewhat cloying and sentimental style of her provincial piety, Therese presents herself as a woman possessed of a will of steel. As a child she had determined to set her sights on the goal of sanctity, and she went on to pursue this objective with courageous tenacity. She called her method of spirituality "the Little Way." Simply put, this meant performing her everyday actions and suffering each petty insult or injury in the presence and love of God.

As a teenager she had literally stormed heaven to win acceptance into the Carmelite convent. Once inside, as her book reveals, she was not content merely to fulfill the letter of her religious rule. Seemingly driven by an inner sense that little time was available, she tried to accelerate the process of sanctification. Devoting herself body and soul to Christ she offered her life as a victim of love for the salvation of souls. So acute was her belief in the Mystical Body of Christ that she believed each act of devotion, each moment of suffering patiently endured, might be credited to other souls in greater need.

Therese considered herself to be of little account — literally a "Little Flower" — though for this reason no less precious in the eyes of God. She also called her Little Way the way of spiritual childhood. But she believed that this way might transform any situation into a profound arena for holiness, and that one might thus, through the effect of subtle ripples, make a significant contribution to transforming the world.

Therese writes of her feeling that she was called to all vocations. She felt a powerful vocation to be a priest — but also a warrior, an apostle, a Doctor of the Church, and a martyr. "I would like to perform the most heroic deeds. I feel I have the courage of a Crusader. I should like to die on the battlefield in defense of the church. If only I were a priest!" The passage of time has not dulled the challenge of this heartfelt confession. But ultimately Therese came to realize that her vocation was nothing less than Charity itself, a virtue embracing every other vocation. "My vocation is love! . . . In the heart of the Church, who is my Mother, *I will be love*. So I shall be everything and so my dreams will be fulfilled!" At another point she described her mission as simply "to make Love loved."

In 1894 Therese woke on the morning of Good Friday to find her mouth filled with blood. She rejoiced privately in the thought that she might soon be on her way to heaven. "I was absolutely sure that, on this anniversary of His death, my Beloved had let me hear His first call, like a gentle, far-off murmur which heralded His joyful arrival." But instead this sign simply heralded the onset of a protracted period of agonizing pain as well as spiritual desolation. Before the end her sufferings would constitute a virtual crucifixion.

Therese wrote her autobiography in obedience to the request of her superior. The last chapters were literally written *in extremis*. During this time her physical torment was aggravated by periods of intense spiritual suffering. Her consciousness was flooded with terrifying images and at times she came close to despair. By continuing to pray and to hold fast to the image of Christ she eventually passed through this dark night. When she died, surrounded by her Carmelite Sisters, her last words were, "Oh, I love Him!... My God... I love you."

The publication of Therese's autobiography immediately struck a responsive chord, especially among the "simple faithful." Few are they who are called to do great things, to witness before kings and princes, or to shoulder the cross of martyrdom. And yet, as Therese demonstrated, there is a principle of continuity between our response to the everyday situations in which we find ourselves and the "great" arenas in which the saints and martyrs have offered their witness. According to Therese, each moment, accepted and lived in a spirit of love, is an occasion for heroism and a potential step along the path to sanctity.

In the years following her death, Therese was credited with an extraordinary number of miracles. It was remembered that she had once said,

"After my death I will let fall a shower of roses. I will spend my heaven in doing good upon earth."

See: *The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux: The Story of a Soul* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image, 1957); Dorothy Day, *Therese* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate Publishers, 1960).

October 4

St. Francis of Assisi

Founder of the Friars Minor (1182–1226)

"We have no right to glory in ourselves because of any extraordinary gifts, since these do not belong to us but to God. But we may glory in crosses, afflictions and tribulations, because these are our own."

St. Francis was born in the Umbrian city of Assisi about the year 1182. His parents were Pietro di Bernardone, a wealthy cloth merchant, and Pica, his French-born wife. Francis was one of the privileged young men of Assisi, attracted to adventure and frivolity as well as tales of romance. When he was about twenty he donned a knight's armor and went off, filled with dreams of glory, to join a war with the neighboring city-state of Perugia. He was captured and spent a year in prison before being ransomed. Upon his return he succumbed to a serious illness from which his recovery was slow. These experiences provoked a spiritual crisis which was ultimately resolved in a series of dramatic episodes.

Francis had always been a fastidious person with an abhorrence for paupers and the sick. As he was riding in the countryside one day he saw a loathsome leper. Dismounting he shared his cloak with the leper and then, moved by some divine impulse, kissed the poor man's ravaged face. From that encounter Francis's life began to take shape around an utterly new agenda, contrary to the values of his family and the world.

While praying before a crucifix in the dilapidated chapel of San Damiano, Francis heard a voice speak to him: "Francis, repair my church, which has fallen into disrepair, as you can see." At first inclined to take this assignment literally, he set about physically restoring the ruined building. Only later did he understand his mission in a wider, more spiritual sense. His vocation was to recall the church to the radical simplicity of the gospel, to the spirit of poverty, and to the image of Christ in his poor.

To pay for his program of church repair, Francis took to divesting his father's warehouse. Pietro di Bernardone, understandably enraged, had his son arrested and brought to trial before the bishop in the public marketplace. Francis admitted his fault and restored his father's money. And then in an extraordinary gesture, he stripped off his rich garments and handed them also to his sorrowing father, saying, "Hitherto I have called you father on earth; but now I say, 'Our Father, who art in heaven.'" The bishop hastily covered him with a peasant's frock, which Francis marked with a cross. And so his transformation was complete.

The spectacle which Francis presented — the rich boy who now camped out in the open air, serving the sick, working with his hands, and bearing witness to the gospel — attracted ridicule from the respectable citizens of Assisi. But gradually it held a subversive appeal. Before long a dozen other young men had joined him. They became the nucleus of his new order, the Friars Minor. The beautiful *Clare of Assisi was soon to follow, slipping through the city walls in the middle of the night to join the wait-

ing brothers. Francis personally cut off her hair, marking her for the life of poverty and her consecration to Christ.

The little community continued to grow. In 1210 they made a pilgrimage to Rome and won the approval of Pope Innocent III. Some of the pope's advisors warned that Francis's simple rule, with its emphasis on material poverty, was impractical. But the worldly pope was apparently moved by the sight of the humble friar and perceived in this movement a bulwark against more radical forces.

Francis left relatively few writings, but his life — literally the embodiment of his message — gave rise to numerous legends and parables. Many of them reflect the joy and freedom that became hallmarks of his spirituality, along with his constant tendency to turn the values of the world on their head. He esteemed Sister Poverty as his wife, "the fairest bride in the whole world." He encouraged his brothers to welcome ridicule and persecution as a means of conforming to the folly of the cross. He taught that unmerited suffering borne patiently for love of Christ was the path to "perfect joy."

But behind such holy "foolishness" Francis could not disguise the serious challenge he posed to the church and the society of his time. Centuries before the expression became current in the church, Francis represented a "preferential option for the poor." Even in his life the Franciscans themselves were divided about how literally to accept his call to radical material poverty. In an age of crusades and other expressions of "sacred violence," Francis also espoused a radical commitment to nonviolence. He rejected all violence as an offense against the gospel commandment of love and a desecration of God's image in all human beings.

Francis had a vivid sense of the sacramentality of creation. All things, whether living or inanimate, reflected their Creator's love and were thus due reverence and wonder. In this spirit he composed his famous "Cantic of Creation," singing the praises of Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and even Sister Death. Altogether his life and his relationship with the world — including animals, the elements, the poor and sick, as well as princes and prelates, women as well as men, represented the breakthrough of a new model of human and cosmic community.

Ultimately Francis attempted no more than to live out the teachings of Christ and the spirit of the gospel. His identification with Christ was so intense that in 1224, while praying in his hermitage, he received the "stigmata," the physical marks of Christ's passion, on his hands and feet. His last years were marked at once by excruciating physical suffering and spiritual happiness. "Welcome Sister Death!" he exclaimed at last. At his request he was laid on the bare ground in his old habit. To the friars gathered around him he gave each his blessing in turn: "I have done my part," he said. "May Christ teach you to do yours." So he died on October 3, 1226. His feast is observed on October 4.

See: Regis J. Armstrong, ed., St. Francis of Assisi: Writings for a Gospel Life (New York: Crossroad, 1994); The Little Flowers of St. Francis, trans. Raphael Brown (Garden City, N.Y.: Image, 1958).

July 31

St. Ignatius of Loyola

Founder of the Society of Jesus (1491–1556)

"To the greater glory of God."

Iñigo López de Loyola was born of a noble Basque family in the kingdom of Castile. The youngest of thirteen children, he spent his youth as a courtier and later a soldier in the service of the Spanish king. As such he was trained in the code of honor and chivalry, ready with his sword to avenge any slight against his dignity or the interests of his master.

In 1521 he took part in the unsuccessful defense of Pamplona against the French. During the battle he was struck in the leg by a cannonball and suffered a grievous injury. Back in his family castle, he underwent excruciating operations, followed by a prolonged convalescence. To pass the idle time he requested something to read — preferably the chivalrous romances of which he was particularly fond. Instead he had to settle for a collection of pious lives of the saints — all that could be produced. He devoured these books, at first simply as an escape from boredom. Gradually, however, he began to find them fascinating. In the long months of his recovery he started imagining what a great honor it must be to serve the glory of God. As zeal for such a life began to take hold, he resolved, upon his recovery, to reform his conduct and to imitate the example of the saints in dedication to God's service.

When he was at last well enough to walk he set off on a pilgrimage to the Catalonian shrine of Our Lady at Monserrat. After an all-night vigil at the shrine he exchanged his rich clothes with a beggar and, in a final gesture of courtly valor, laid his sword and dagger on the altar of Our Lady. Thus he became a soldier of Christ. The next day he walked to the nearby town of Manresa, where he spent several months in solitary reflection. During this time his commitment was further excited by a series of mystical visions, including the sight of a blinding light emanating from the Eucharist.

After a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he determined to become a priest. This, however, required that he resume his education. So he applied himself diligently to the study of Latin and eventually traveled to France to study at the University of Paris. While there he began to exhort his fellow students to a life of heroic piety. Eventually he persuaded a small group of six to join him in forming a new religious order, dedicated to renewing

and serving the church in any way their services might be required. This was the nucleus of what would eventually become the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, as they were popularly known. Their official recognition by Pope Paul III came in 1540. Ignatius was named the first superior general.

It was a period of crisis and opportunity in the Catholic church. By this time Ignatius's contemporary Martin Luther had initiated the Protestant Reformation. At the same time the voyages of Spanish and Portuguese explorers had dramatically changed the face of the known world and exposed the vast portions of the human race as yet untouched by the gospel. Ignatius's Jesuits, who took a special vow to put themselves at the service of the pope, were highly visible in rising to both these challenges. No sooner had they been established than many of the original Jesuits set out on perilous missions to Asia, New Spain, and Protestant England, in the process contributing substantially to the calendar of martyrs. Ignatius remained behind, following the progress of his sons and offering direction through voluminous correspondence. Renowned as men of action as well as learning, the Jesuits played a vital role in preserving and renewing the vitality of Catholicism in the sixteenth and subsequent centuries. At the same time, their methods and mystique aroused significant opposition. Their extreme discipline and loyalty to the Society caused friction with the secular clergy, while their commitment to social justice and their tendency to put the cause of the gospel ahead of national interests provoked the suspicions of many secular rulers.

Ignatius himself was not immune to such controversy. But ultimately the church came to recognize his substantial gifts and to draw energy from his method of "contemplation in action." Aside from founding the Jesuits, one of his great contributions was in the publication of his *Spiritual Exercises*, a manual devised for the spiritual formation of his followers. The Exercises centered around a series of guided meditations on such themes as the creation of the world, the life and ministry of Jesus, and his death and resurrection, designed to be completed in the course of a thirty-day retreat. Based on the experience of his own conversion, the Exercises were designed to facilitate "discernment." This was a process by which the retreatant might be guided in the direction of a vocation—the individual means of glorifying God by one's life.

In the fifteen years that he served as general of the order, Ignatius saw the Jesuits increase from ten members to a thousand, at the same time becoming one of the most dynamic orders in the church. Ignatius died on July 31, 1556. He was canonized in 1622.

See: *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Joseph Tetlow, *Ignatius Loyola: Spiritual Exercises* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

November 29

Dorothy Day

Co-Founder of the Catholic Worker (1897–1980)

"Whatever I had read as a child about the saints had thrilled me. I could see the nobility of giving one's life for the sick, the maimed, the leper. . . . But there was another question in my mind. Why was so much done in remedying the evil instead of avoiding it in the first place? . . . Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves, but to do away with slavery?"

When Dorothy Day died in 1980 at the age of eighty-three it was observed that she was "the most influential, interesting, and significant figure" in the history of American Catholicism. This was an extraordinary statement on behalf of someone who occupied no official position in the church — indeed, someone whose ideas were almost universally rejected throughout most of her life. The Catholic Worker, a lay movement she founded in 1933 and oversaw for nearly fifty years, was an effort to show that the radical gospel commandment of love could be lived. She understood this challenge not just in the personal form of charity (the works of mercy) but in a political form as well, confronting and resisting the social forces which gave rise to such a need for charity. She represented a new type of political holiness — a way of serving Christ not only through prayer and sacrifice but through solidarity with the poor and in struggle along the path of justice and peace.

As a result some people called her a communist. She was shot at, jailed, and investigated repeatedly by the F.B.I. She was not seriously disturbed by criticism. "The servant is not greater than his master," she liked to quote. On the other hand there were many who liked to call her saint. That was another matter. "When they call you a saint," she often said, "it means basically that you're not to be taken seriously." She regarded it as way of dismissing her challenge: "Dorothy can do that; she's a saint!" The implication was that hard decisions must have come easily for her. Actually, no one knew as well as she how dearly she had paid for her vocation: "Neither revolutions nor faith is won without keen suffering.

For me Christ was not to be bought for thirty pieces of silver but with my heart's blood. We buy not cheap in this market."

Day was born in Brooklyn in 1897. Though she was baptized as an Episcopalian she had little exposure to religion. By the time she was in college she had rejected Christianity in favor of the radical cause. She dropped out of school and worked as a journalist in New York with a variety of radical papers and took part in the popular protests of her day. Her friends were communists, anarchists, and an assortment of New York artists and intellectuals, most of the opinion that religion was the "opium of the people."

A turning point in her life came in 1926 when she was living on Staten Island with a man she deeply loved. She became pregnant, an event that sparked a mysterious conversion. The experience of what she called "natural happiness," combined with a sense of the aimlessness of her Bohemian existence, turned her heart to God. She decided she would have her child baptized as a Roman Catholic, a step she herself followed in 1927. The immediate impact of this was the painful end of her common-law marriage. The man she loved had no use for marriage. But she also suffered from the sense that her conversion represented a betrayal of the cause of the poor. The church, though in many ways the home of the poor, seemed otherwise to identify with the status quo. So she spent some lonely years in the wilderness, raising her child alone, while praying for some way of reconciling her faith and her commitment to social justice.

The answer came in 1932 with a providential meeting. *Peter Maurin, an itinerant philosopher and agitator, encouraged her to begin a newspaper that would offer solidarity with the workers and a critique of the social system from the radical perspective of the Gospels. The *Catholic Worker* was launched on May 1, 1933. Like a true prophet, Maurin was concerned not simply to denounce injustice but to announce a new social order, based on the recognition of Christ in one's neighbors. In an effort to practice what they preached, Day converted the office of the *Catholic Worker* into a "house of hospitality" — the first of many — offering food for the hungry and shelter for the tired masses uprooted by the Depression.

But Day's message did not end with the works of mercy. For her the logic of the Sermon on the Mount also led to an uncompromising commitment to nonviolence. Despite widespread criticism she maintained a pacifist position throughout World War II and later took part in numerous civil disobedience campaigns against the spirit of the Cold War and the peril of nuclear war. Later, in the 1960s, when social protest became almost commonplace, Day's peacemaking witness — rooted in her daily life among the poor and sustained by the discipline of liturgy and prayer — retained a particular credibility and challenge.

The enigma of Dorothy Day was her ability to reconcile her radical social positions (she called herself an anarchist as well as a pacifist) with a traditional and even conservative piety. Her commitment to poverty, obedience, and chastity was as firm as any nun's. But she remained thoroughly immersed in the secular world with all the "precarity" and disorder that came with life among the poor. Her favorite saint was

*Therese of Lisieux, the young Carmelite nun whose "little way" indicated the path to holiness within all our daily occupations. From Therese Day drew the insight that any act of love might contribute to the balance of love in the world, any suffering endured in love might ease the burden of others; such was the mysterious bond within the Body of Christ.

In combining the practice of charity and the call to justice Day represented a type of holiness not easily domesticated, but perhaps of special relevance to our times. She called on the church to recover its identity as an offense and mystery in the eyes of the world. Her life was a living parable, focused on what she called the mystery of the poor: "that they are Jesus, and what you do for them you do to Him." She died on November 29, 1980.

See: Robert Ellsberg, ed., *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992); Jim Forest, *Love Is the Measure: A Biography of Dorothy Day* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

Baal Shem Tov

Founder of Hasidism (1700–1760)

*"I came into the world to show another way,
to cultivate love of God, of Israel, and of the Torah,
and there is no need for fasting and mortification."*

The Baal Shem Tov — "Master of the Good Name" — was the title given to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer of Mezbizk, the founder of Hasidic Judaism. Rather than providing a set of teachings the Baal Shem Tov — or the Besht, as his name was commonly abbreviated — communicated his lessons through a certain attitude, a spirit of joy, an instinct for the holiness of existence, that would ultimately inspire a following far beyond the Hasidim, or "pious ones," as his followers came to be called.

He was born in a small town in the Ukraine in 1700. For Jews of that time and place the memory of savage persecution was still fresh. A series of pogroms in the latter half of the seventeenth century cost the lives of more than a hundred thousand Jews. In such an atmosphere of catastrophe there arose a number of messianic and mystical movements, of which Hasidism was ultimately the most successful. Nevertheless, the first part of the Besht's life was spent in quiet obscurity. Only midway through his life did he suddenly take to wandering from village to village, performing wonders and imparting his vision and wisdom. The Besht proclaimed a mysticism of the everyday. Within each task and each moment there was a spark of the divine. The responsibility for each person was to discover and to fulfill the potential holiness imbedded within ordinary existence. This responsibility, furthermore, should be discharged in a spirit of joy. He opposed obsessive asceticism and self-mortification, just as he opposed a preoccupation with the law. Much more important was the spirit in which one lived. The religious life, according to the Besht, was not a matter of performing religious duties; the essential thing was the piety that one brought to daily life. He spoke of prayer as a window to heaven and called the entire world a prayer house. Thus, "A man needs no fixed place to say his prayers, no synagogues; among the trees of the forest, everywhere one can pray."

*Martin Buber, the twentieth-century Jewish philosopher, was the first to popularize the tales and legends of the Baal Shem Tov and the early Hasidic masters, thus helping to carry their message far beyond their original home in Eastern Europe. Though not himself a Hasid, Buber believed that Hasidic spirituality had a universal message especially relevant to the secularized West. He summarized this message as the consecration of everyday life to God: "For there is no rung of being on which we cannot find the holiness of God everywhere and at all times." Elsewhere he noted, "The task of man, of every man, according to Hasidic teaching, is to affirm for God's sake the world and himself and by this very means to transform both."

The large Hasidic community in Eastern Europe was largely extinguished by the Nazis. But vibrant communities, especially in the United States and Israel, continue to live out the joyful and compassionate vision of the Baal Shem Tov. As he lay dying, surrounded by his family and followers, the Besht said, "I am not worried at all for I know that I am leaving through one door and entering through another door."

He died on May 22, 1760.

See: Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken, 1966); Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, eds., *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1970).

Hans and Sophie Scholl

Martyrs of the White Rose (d. 1943)

"We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience."

In the summer and fall of 1942 the citizens of Munich were astonished by a series of leaflets that began to circulate throughout the city. Slipped into mailboxes by unknown hands, left in empty bus stops or on park benches, the leaflets contained a sweeping indictment of the Nazi regime and enjoined readers to work for the defeat of their own nation. At a time when the merest hint of private dissent was a treasonable offense, the audacity of this open call to resistance threw the Gestapo into a rage.

Contrary to the suspicions of the authorities, the authors of these leaflets, who called themselves simply "The White Rose," were not members of any sophisticated organization. They were in fact a few dozen university students who had been inspired by Christian faith and the uncorrupted idealism of youth to challenge the edifice of tyranny. At the center of the group were a brother and sister, Hans and Sophie Scholl, only twenty-four and twenty-one years old. Hans was a medical student who had served on the Russian front. Sophie studied philosophy. Discerning with uncommon clarity the depth of Nazi depravity, they had decided to wage a spiritual war against the system, armed with no other weapons than courage, the power of truth, and an illegal duplicating machine. Their strategy was simple. At the very least they hoped to shatter the illusion of unanimous consent and to defy the Nazis' claim to omnipotence. Beyond that, they dared hope that by proclaiming the truth they might break the spell in which all Germany was enthralled and inspire those with doubts to move toward active resistance.

Hans and Sophie were devout Christians. They believed that the struggle against Hitler was a battle for the soul of Germany, and thus a duty for all Christians. As one of their leaflets read, "Everywhere and at all times of greatest trial men have appeared, prophets and saints who cherished their freedom, who preached the One God and who with His help brought the people to a reversal of their downward course. Man is free, to be sure, but without the true God he is defenseless against the principle of evil. . . . We must attack evil where it is strongest, and it is strongest in the power of Hitler. . . . We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace."

Emboldened by the furor caused by their leaflets, members of the White Rose began to make other dangerous gestures, such as writing "Down with Hitler" on street signs and the walls of buildings. It was perhaps inevitable that the circle of amateurs would be discovered. The end began on February 18, 1943, when Hans and Sophie were caught distributing leaflets outside a lecture hall in the university. Under arrest and realizing that their fates were sealed, they proceeded to confess to all the actions of the White Rose, thus hoping to spare other conspirators from discovery. Despite their efforts, however, the Gestapo quickly rounded up the rest of the circle, both in Munich and in Hamburg, where an allied cell had formed.

Hans and Sophie Scholl along with their fellow conspirator Christoph Probst, a twenty-three-year-old medical student, were quickly convicted of treason and sentenced to death. All witnesses attest to the extraordinary poise with which Hans and Sophie met their fate. Their bravery was based not just on a confidence in the verdict of history, but on a deep faith that the executioner's block was the entryway to freedom and eternal life. They were beheaded on February 22.

See: Inge Scholl, *The White Rose: Munich 1942-43* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983).

Bd. Damien of Molokai

Priest and Leper (1840-1899)

"I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all for Christ."

Damien De Veuster, a young Belgian priest, had served nine years as a missionary in the Hawaiian Islands when he felt called to request a perilous assignment. He asked his superiors to be allowed to serve on the island of Molokai, the notorious leper colony.

Westerners had arrived in the Hawaiian Islands only late in the eighteenth century, finding a native population of about three hundred thousand. Within a hundred years the ravages of disease had reduced this number to fifty thousand. Among many illnesses, the most dreaded scourge was leprosy. The first case appeared only in 1840, but within thirty years it had reached epidemic proportions. Helpless to control its spread and unable at that time to offer any remedy, the authorities responded in 1868 by establishing a leper settlement on the remote and inaccessible island of Molokai. By law, Hawaiians found to be suffering from the disease were snatched by force from their families and communities and sent to this island exile to perish.

Conditions on the island were horrific. Patients were literally dumped in the surf and left to make their way ashore, seek shelter in caves or squalid shacks, and cling to life as best they could, beyond the pale of any civil or moral law.

It was to this island that Father Damien was assigned. From the beginning he sought to instill in the members of his "parish" a sense of self-worth and dignity. His first task was to restore dignity to death. Where previously the deceased were tossed into shallow graves to be consumed by pigs and dogs, he designed a clean and fenced-in cemetery and established a proper burial society. He constructed a church and worked alongside the people building clean new houses. Within several years of his arrival the island was utterly transformed; no longer a way-station to death, it had become a proud and joyful community.

As part of his effort to uplift the self-esteem of his flock, Damien realized from the beginning that he must not shrink from contact with the people. Despite the horrid physical effects of the disease, he insisted on intimate contact with them. When he preached, he made a habit of referring to his flock not as "my brothers and sisters," but as "we lepers."

One day this reference assumed a new meaning, as Damien recognized in himself the unmistakable symptoms of the disease. Now he was truly one with the suffering of his people, literally confined, as they were, to the island of Molokai. Despite the advancing illness, which eventually ravaged his body, he redoubled his efforts, working tirelessly in his building projects and his pastoral responsibilities.

In his last years he suffered terrible bouts of loneliness, feeling keenly the lack of a religious community of support, and even the opportunity to receive absolution. On one occasion a visiting bishop refused to disembark from his ship. Damien rowed out to meet him and suffered the humiliation of shouting up his confession. Because of fear of contagion he was even forbidden to visit the mission headquarters of his order in Honolulu.

Damien died of leprosy on April 15, 1899. By that time his fame had spread widely throughout the world. He was beatified in 1995 by Pope John Paul II.

See: Gavan Dawes, *Holy Man, Fr. Damien of Molokai* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

St. Maximilian Kolbe

Franciscan Priest and Martyr (1894–1941)

"These Nazis will not kill our souls, since we prisoners certainly distinguish ourselves quite definitely from our tormentors; they will not be able to deprive us of the dignity of our Catholic belief. We will not give up. And when we die, then we die pure and peaceful, resigned to God in our hearts."

On July 30, 1941, a prisoner escaped from Auschwitz, the notorious Nazi concentration camp in Poland. In retaliation the commandant of the camp lined up the inmates of cell block 14 and ordered that ten of them be selected for punishment. They would be consigned to an underground bunker and starved to death. Ten men were selected. One of them, Francis Gajowniczek, cried out in tears, "My poor wife and children! I will never see them again." At this point another prisoner stepped forward and volunteered to take his place. The commandant asked who he was. He replied, "I am a Catholic priest." The commandant accepted his offer, and so Father Maximilian Kolbe assumed his place among the condemned.

Father Kolbe was born in Zdunska Wola, Poland, in 1894. At the age of sixteen he joined the Franciscans. He was a sickly youth, prone to debilitating bouts of tuberculosis that regularly sent him to the sanatorium. Nevertheless he was animated by pious zeal which was matched by a positive genius for organization. After his ordination he formed a movement called the Knights of Mary Immaculate, which was devoted to propagating traditional Marian devotion, and launched a series of journals. One of these achieved a circulation of eight hundred thousand in Poland. He also organized a community called City of the Immaculate, which grew to include 762 Conventual friars, the largest religious community of men in the world. In the 1930s he started a similar foundation in Japan, the Garden of the Immaculate.

Kolbe was back in Poland in 1939 when the Nazis invaded. Gauging the Nazis' enmity for religion, he intuited his eventual fate and prepared himself for a time of suffering. "I would like to suffer and die in a knightly manner," he stated, "even to the shedding of the last drop of my blood, to hasten the day of gaining the whole world for the Immaculate Mother of God."

Kolbe was arrested in February 1941 and by May was on his way to Auschwitz. Ragged and hungry, suffering again from tubercular attacks, subject to beatings and other abuse, Kolbe survived for three months of hard labor. All this time he remained a beacon of faith to his fellow prisoners, encouraging them to pray and counseling them against despair.

His final passion began when he entered the death bunker in July 1941. There was nothing for the inmates to consume but their own urine. Kolbe passed the days leading his companions in prayer, preparing them for death, and keeping vigil with them as they gradually succumbed. By August 14 Kolbe and three others were still alive, at which point the Nazis grew tired of waiting any longer. The four were dispatched by injections of carbolic acid; their bodies were cremated in the camp ovens.

In 1982 Pope John Paul II who, as bishop of Cracow, had often prayed at the scene of Kolbe's death, presided over his canonization in Rome. Present for the ceremony was Francis Gajowniczek, the man in whose place Kolbe had died. The pope called Kolbe a true martyr and saint for our times whose heroic charity proved victorious over the architects of death. He cited the words from the Gospel of John: "Greater love hath no man than this: that he lay down his life for his friends."

See: Boniface Hanley, O.F.M., *Maximilian Kolbe: No Greater Love* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria, 1982).

June 12

Anne Frank

Witness of the Holocaust (1929–1945)

*"Who would ever think that so much can go on
in the soul of a young girl?"*

There are some persons whose great gift, in a dark age, is simply to maintain a candlelight of humanity and so to guarantee that darkness should not have the final word. Anne Frank, a Jewish child who perished during the Holocaust, was surely one of these. Her life was extinguished at the age of fifteen — thus contributing to the Nazi dream of a Jewish-free Europe. But her light continued to burn, thus fulfilling her own dream: "I want to go on living after my death."

Anne's story is well known. She was born on June 12, 1929. During the Nazi occupation of Holland, her family and another family, the Van Daams, took shelter in a "secret annex" in her father's office in the center of Amsterdam. They remained sequestered for two years. Keeping still all day, never able to leave their hidden quarters, they relied on the support of Dutch friends to preserve their secret, to bring them supplies and news of the outside world. Anne was thirteen when she entered the annex in July 1942. Besides her schoolbooks and her treasured scrapbook of Hollywood stars, Anne brought along with her a diary she had received for her thirteenth birthday. Addressing her daily entries to an imaginary girlfriend, "Kitty," Anne faithfully kept her diary throughout the course of her captivity. This diary was published after the war and was quickly acclaimed as one of the most deeply affecting artifacts of the Holocaust. But because of Anne's unusual gifts as a writer and because of the extraordinary qualities of her personality, her work merits recognition as a literary classic in its own right and as one of the great moral documents of the twentieth century.

For Anne herself keeping a diary was not simply a distraction but a duty, a responsibility to render her experience and her feelings in the most accurate possible terms. "I want to write, but more than that, I want to bring out all kinds of things that lie buried deep in my heart," she writes in the early pages. With remarkable skill Anne manages to describe the personalities and atmosphere in the annex — the strain of captivity and close quarters and the brave efforts to carry on with life. All this takes place against the backdrop of fear and the constant danger of discovery.

I see the eight of us with our "Secret Annex" as if we were a little piece of blue heaven, surrounded by heavy black rain clouds. The round, clearly defined spot where we stand is still safe, but the clouds gather more closely about us and the circle which separates us from the approaching danger closes more and more tightly.

The diary is mostly a sharply recorded chronicle of the everyday trials and the modest joys of a young girl's life "underground." But it also contains Anne's remarkably unchildlike reflections on the meaning of life and faith in the face of adversity.

The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely, or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet alone with the heavens, nature, and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. As long as this exists... I know that there will always be comfort for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances may be.

Lying in bed, she says she ends her evening prayers with the words, "I thank you, God, for all that is good and dear and beautiful," and adds, "I am filled with joy. . . . I don't think of all the misery, but of the beauty that still remains."

Aside from acknowledging the terror that prowls beyond her hiding place, the diary also reflects the mysterious unfolding of Anne's personality, her emergence from childhood, and her growing sense of herself as a person with a future and a task in the world.

I know what I want, I have a goal, an opinion, I have a religion and love. Let me be myself and then I am satisfied. I know that I'm a woman, a woman with inward strength and plenty of courage. If God lets me live... I shall not remain insignificant, I shall work in the world and for mankind! And now I know that first and foremost I shall require courage and cheerfulness.

Rarely has anyone so well defined the virtues required by our age — "courage and cheerfulness" — as this fourteen-year-old girl already living under sentence of death.

In August 1944, soon after Anne's fifteenth birthday, the secret annex was betrayed and all its eight inhabitants were dispersed among the factories of death. Only Otto Frank, Anne's father, survived the war and returned to the old house in Amsterdam. He learned that his wife had died in January 1945 in Auschwitz, while Anne and her sister Margot had died of typhus in Bergen-Belsen in early March. Then he was presented with the diaries of his daughter, lovingly preserved by friends in hopes of her eventual return.

In light of her death it is excruciating to read Anne's intimate confidences, her account of the homey details of life in hiding. But through the girlish record of quarrels with her mother, worries about her studies, and the possibilities for finding romantic happiness with the Van Daams' teenage son, Otto Frank was the first to recognize in his daughter's diary a profound witness to the value of life and the virtue of hope. Words written days before her arrest only gain additional power in the light of her fate:

In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart... I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right... In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out.

See: *The Diary of Anne Frank* (London: Pan, 1954).