

Excerpt from
Vintage Saints and Sinners: 25 Christians Who Transformed My Faith
by Karen Wright Marsh (InterVarsity Press, 2017)



Throughout my life, as I've become a mother and not a nun, a teacher and not a missionary, I've been accompanied by "vintage" Christians-spiritual mentors from across the Christian tradition, committed Jesus followers who kept the faith in their own times and places. What began as an intellectual study, even idealized admiration, of notable spiritual figures has become a deeper personal experience of reading from the heart. Over the years, I have been awed by ancient lives of humility and strength. Even now, sitting in my living room, I discover more of my own unexpected connections to obscure believers from distant eras. They light up my imagination, calling me to greater things, even as the kitchen sink fills with sticky plates, tax deadlines arrive, and I forget to pray.

While scrubbing pots and pans in the kitchen of a seventeenth-century French monastery, Brother Lawrence learned to practice the comforting presence of God. When I know that, though frustrated by failure, he persisted in his spiritual disciplines year after year, I see how callously impatient I am for the rush of a spiritual high. Then I meet Amanda Berry Smith, a woman who, though she was born in slavery, prayed her way through trembling fear to preach of God's power to white Americans and evangelize throughout four far-flung continents. Each vintage Christian, whatever the century, encountered God for themselves and each responded wholeheartedly. To learn their stories is to see my own time-bound experience in the light of God's pursuing presence. They bring me perspective, calm, and the hope that I too will come to bear the marks of a vibrant spiritual life.

I've read the words of radically committed Christians—and they seem, at first, to be more righteously determined than I could ever be. No wonder: the historical, faithful people you and I often speak of as "saints" are models of extraordinary conviction and intimidating courage. There are the ones who've been canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, recognized by the eternal honorific "Saint" in front of their names. Others lived such godly lives that we can't help but envision them on pedestals. That kind of veneration prompted Dorothy Day, tireless advocate for the poor, to say, "Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed so easily."

As I've gotten up close to the personal stories of vintage Christians, I have met them in their humanity. They may be called saints, but they are sinners, strugglers, and seekers too. When they speak across the centuries, their lives turn out to be just as messy as (and sometimes much messier than) mine. I've learned that the smiling Mother Teresa, serving the dying poor in Calcutta, felt for years that her desperate

prayers were met by God's silence. And that the eminent intellectual defender of the faith, C. S. Lewis, went through his teens and twenties convinced that Christianity was for idiots.

I've moved beyond seeing these people as inaccessible super-saints and have encountered them as perfect companions for a real life pilgrimage. They are wise guides in the faith who have been this way before. Older brothers and sisters who urge me on, reassuring me with their own tales of travail and discovery.

When I find myself wandering, at a loss, through a foreign city street, or gritting my teeth over an unwelcome bill in the morning mail, their reassuring words come to me. They are not shocked when I snap at my children or take my husband for granted. In better times, they remind me that it is God who gives a leisurely hour to sleep in the warm sun or sit in silence with a close friend. Whether in anxious, frustrated, lonely moments or in restful, joyous celebrations, these saints and sinners know how I feel.

Am I a paragon of faith? (The honest answer is no.) While I once thought that I should labor to look and act and believe just like the other "successful" Christians in my life, I've been freed up by something Thomas Merton once wrote: "For me to be a saint means to be myself." Not that godly person I greatly admire, but myself. I see now that I'm engaged in a creative, enlivening, one-of-a-kind work of God in me, redeemed by Christ for good things. Who knows what kind of saint I, as myself, am becoming?

From these vintage saints and sinners, in all of their variety, I am learning lessons about the qualities of authentic spirituality-about faith as a journey through struggles and weakness and into freedom and true strength... It's my hope that by bringing you the words of vintage Christians- with their struggles, joys and revelations— and by opening up about the questions I've asked and the lessons I've learned, you'll discover that God's saving, guiding, transforming grace is here for you, as well.

