

Saints, Socks and Sundays



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

There was a time when I regularly (even religiously) turned to the "saints" for their wisdom, to learn lessons from their spiritual lives: Teresa of Avila; Julian of Norwich; Hildegard of Bingen and her symphonies; John of the Cross and his "dark night of the soul"; Augustine and his "Confessions"; Francis of Assisi and his "Canticles." Reading Thomas Merton's "Wisdom of the Desert Fathers" was a delight, with stories and sayings that inspired deeper thought and contemplation.

I often drew stories from these early monastics while leading groups or teaching classes. They seemed an endless mine for meditation and prayer. Along the way I would introduce "saints" from other traditions. Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi and Taoist voices were added to the lessons of the Christian saints.

As a chaplain I depended on the faithful support of volunteers and congregations. St. Vincent dePaul became a central hub for the work as it did for many in the "community of the streets." "St. Vinnies," as it is affectionately named by the community, was and is one of the great social service agencies, providing daily meals, rental assistance, counseling and much more. I would call it Compassion Central. A vibrant community center and safe space off the streets during the day, Vinnies was the perfect place for our chaplaincy team to connect with "our people."

There were many directors, employees and volunteers who made St. Vincent's thrive through the years, but one in particular stands out for me. His name was Bob Kunst. He's gone now, but his legacy should not be forgotten.

Bob had been the director of St. Vincent's before he joined our chaplaincy board where he served for several years. Especially skilled as a treasurer, Bob was also a steady voice of wisdom for us all. His familiarity with many of the people on the street coupled with his long experience in direct service made him an exceptional colleague.

He took a loving yet firm approach and had no stars in his eyes. He also never seemed to "spiritualize" the people or their situation. It was certainly a "God thing" for him, and his deep faith was evident, yet he never wore that on his sleeve, which was most visible in his interactions with people in the free dining room or on the sidewalk, as well as his work with our inter-religious chaplaincy.



"Saint Bob" saw the humanity in everyone. COURTESY OF NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM, MEMPHIS, TENN.

Bob's playful humor was clearest for me in something he did within his own Catholic community. Bob organized "Sock and Undie Sundays" in a number of parishes. His relationship with people in poverty and distress made him acutely sensitive to the greatest needs. In his mind, human contact was essential and spiritual care was necessary but so was practical assistance which included basic clothing. Most might not consider socks and underwear as necessities (I often smiled imagining families and seniors carrying "intimate apparel" into church).

Bob would advocate in parishes and speak to priests about setting aside special Sundays to collect donations of new socks and underwear. In the days following "Sock and Undie Sunday," Bob would appear at a shelter, shower location, the chaplaincy office and St. Vincent's with his van to deliver bags full of new underwear and socks.

Merton wrote that the desert hermits were "very alert and very sensitive to the landmarks of a trackless wilderness." In other words, in their solitary way, they were explorers, venturing "where no one has gone before." This makes me think of naturalists like John Muir, but also participatory pragmatists like "Saint Bob."

Bob would laugh with embarrassment and wave off any mention of him being a saint. But why not Bob? Humble service seems fairly good criteria for

the title, wouldn't you agree? It's not about purity or piety but presence.

I think Bob left us some valuable lessons about sainthood and those we like to venerate or emulate as paragons of the spiritual life. He wore no robes or big crosses; he was a faithful Catholic Christian who was humble enough to work side by side with friends of any faith and no faith; he was a successful businessman who shared his wealth along with his heart and intelligence. Always bringing a smile into every room, Saint Bob exuded cheerfulness as well as a respectful seriousness, especially face to face with suffering people.

I no longer believe in sainthood. There are many wise and respectable teachers in word and deed. Some are people of faith, others are not; good human beings who seem to have a natural sense of kindness and compassion, who devote their lives to helping others.

People like Bob remind me that, regardless of religious beliefs, each of us can be generous and good, though few may ever think of us as saints.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.