

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

While I was a student at Kenrick Seminary in St. Louis in the late 1970s, the archdiocese hosted a conference that featured two world famous Catholic speakers: Bishop Fulton Sheen, who had spread the faith through his popular television show in the United States, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who inspired countless millions by her humble service to the poorest of the poor in India. One of my classmates got a zany idea, which he succeeded to pull off. We were in our mid-20s. He showed up at the conference and between events, elbowed up, and managed a few moments to speak one on one with Mother Teresa. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a baseball, and asked if she'd autograph it. Mother Teresa had never seen a baseball before, so he explained the custom of important people leaving a memory of their work in this way. She took up a pen and signed it. He then took the same baseball and the same request to other speaker. When Bishop Sheen saw Mother Teresa's signature, he quipped, "Well, we're both in the same bullpen." He added his autograph next to hers. My friend was convinced they'd both be named saints some day, and he'd be the only person in the world with a treasure like this. He still has it.

Especially in Mother Teresa's case, many people considered her a living saint. When journalists asked her how she felt about that, she'd respond with this unease: people may point to her and overlook their own call to service and holiness. She rightly thought everyone should strive to be a saint.

As we sometimes overly stress the goodness of one other person, we may categorize other people as unrepentantly evil. Social media is an especially friendly environment for unfriendly remarks. Each of us is a mixture of good and bad, and we are all called to something better, to shine with the light of Christ.

St. Matthew structured his entire gospel around five of Jesus' discourses framed by accounts of his birth and death. Perhaps Matthew chose that number in imitation of the bible's first five books, the Torah, that prepare the way for all that follows. Jesus' first discourse was his Sermon on the Mount, opening with the Beatitudes, as we heard last Sunday, and continuing today. Jesus had not yet called the Twelve, but already he laid out expectations of those who heard him.

The gospels admit the apostles were not perfect people. For their mistakes and facing people's prejudices, they probably suffered verbal abuse in the first-century equivalent of posting one's views. Yet Jesus still called imperfect people to become saints.

Jesus didn't say to his followers, "You ought to be salt of the earth and light of the world." He said, "You are the salt of the earth... [and] the light of the world." He saw something in them that others may have overlooked. They had enough virtues to be holy.

Sometimes we criticize others because they are not holy enough, yet we shrug off our own vices thinking we could never become a saint like Mother Teresa: We expect too much of others and too little of ourselves. It might change our views if we considered more patiently all the imperfect people Jesus had in mind both in his day and in ours when he proclaimed on the mount, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."