WHEN THE SAINTS …

4th of AUGUST JEAN-BAPTISTE VIANNEY

5th of AUGUST KING OSWALD

6th of AUGUST THE TRANSFIGURATION

7th of AUGUST JOHN MASON NEALE

8th of AUGUST DOMINIC

9th of AUGUST MARY SUMNER

ST JEAN-BAPTISTE VIANNEY is better known as ‘LE CURE D’ARS,’ of whom books and plays have been written. He is the patron saint of those who struggle to achieve their goals, but, perhaps more importantly, he’s the patron saint of the parish priest.

Born in a small country village in France in 1786, Jean-Baptiste spent his youth as a shepherd on his father’s farm, and, with the French revolution in process, he had to learn about his religion and practise his devotions secretly.

At age 17, round about 1803, he experienced a calling to become a priest, but he had no education, and because the lessons were in Latin, he had to take additional coaching in Latin as well. In 1813 he entered the seminary, and had to struggle both with his poor Latin and with the training; in 1815 he was finally ordained, and spent two years as a curate.

In 1818 he was sent to an out-of-the-way village called D’Ars, where, he was warned, there was neither religion nor love, and that it would be his job to bring both. Through Eucharistic adoration, extraordinary penances and tireless work he gradually won over his parishioners.

What should be plain enough already is that Jean-Baptiste must have had some extraordinary qualities in order to get himself accepted for ordination with no perceptible education attainment; and once arrived in his new parish he ‘turned it round,’ to use the jargon, and had people flocking to him to hear his sermons and eventually to confess to him.

His fame spread very quickly, and people travelled to see and hear him from all over France. He would preach a sermon at 11 in the morning and sometimes be hearing confessions for anything up to 16-18 hours a day: people waited sometimes days to see him.

It is not clear exactly how Jean-Baptiste brought about such a transformation: he was certainly a holy man, and lived a holy life which initially hostile parishioners grew to respect, but, of course, at this time, when things began to settle down after the excesses of the revolution, perhaps, as happens so often when the powers that be try to supress religion, people simply reverted to being their best selves, and responded without defensive cynicism to what they recognised in their priest as authentic love and holiness.

He died in August 1859 and was canonised by Pope Pius XI in 1925 Jean–Baptiste - used to pass the credit for any miracles that happened onto a girl he called his little Saint Philomena; and at one time there were so many miracles that he had to ask her to stop working!

There is a community of Sisters of St Jean Vianney who undertake charitable works.

In 2010 Pope Benedict declared St Jean Vianney to be the patron saint of all priests; interesting, in view of his exceptionally poor level of educational attainment, but a very deep and humbling message for all clergy who may feel it sufficient to be able to disguise a lack of essential personal qualities behind an ability to blind parishioners with complex theology: many DDO’s and those serving on panels whose job it is to discern vocations would do better, occasionally, to be aware of the difference between knowledge and wisdom.

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KING OSWALD of NORTHUMBRIA is featured in the first three chapters of our friend BEDE’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People and church.

Himself a very holy and charitable man, Bede reports that he and his retinue were preparing to take a meal of rich food on a silver platter when a servant came in and told Oswald that a group of poor people were begging outside his palace, so that he ordered that the dinner and the dish should be given to them.

There is so much material in Bede concerning the Anglo-Saxon saints of the 7th century, in particular, that it would really be worth your buying a good paperback copy of the book, but do get one with an index or chapter headings!

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THE TRANSFIGURATION of Jesus together with Moses and Elijah is recounted in the synoptic Gospels as an event in time: Jesus has taken his three closest disciples to the top of a mountain; there they receive a unique and truly transformative experience, when they return ‘to Earth’ life has been ‘going on as ever’ that is badly, as Benjamin, the lazy cynical donkey of ‘Animal Farm’ could have predicted.

Whilst it is essential for the reader that the account of the transfiguration be narrated as an episode in its place and time, the experience itself is, in reality, intended to convey a truth quite outside the dimension of time; and it is perhaps for this reason that real life is presented to us via both Jesus and the disciples with such devastating contrast afterwards.

Moses, the greatest of the prophets and [supposedly] author of the entire Torah, ascends a mountain to be given God’s Ten Commandments: he has to veil his face on his way down in case its unearthly shining frightens the onlookers. He is the prototype of the mystic in pursuit of God for himself, as opposed to God as the provider of benefits and blessings, and he appears to Moses – or, rather, his back appears to Moses – as light and fire.

Elijah, as we saw when looking at the birth of John the Baptist, was believed to have been carried into heaven by a chariot of fire; and it was hoped and believed that his return would signal the coming of the Messiah, which is why John the Baptist is quizzed by the Jerusalem big wigs as to who he says he is, and whether he is, in fact, Elijah returning to Earth.

The other Hebrew concept we don’t hear about very much as Christians is the Shekinah; the ‘locus’ on earth of God’s glory, which traditionally resided in the sanctuary of the Temple and occurs in various stories in the Old Testament, but not always in the form of light. In the simplest possible terms, then, the meaning of the transfiguration is God’s affirmation, by means of the Shekinah, of Jesus as his Messiah, together with the principal prophets, intended to confirm to the three disciples present that, as John’s Gospel makes clearer, perhaps, the principal focus of the Father’s presence has been transferred from the sanctuary of the Temple, and onto the person of Jesus.

There is a thoroughly practical message in the story as recounted in the Gospels: when the disciples come to Earth, they do so in every sense of the expression. They’re not allowed to wallow in the experience they’ve just undergone; life is happening and Jesus is needed urgently, because things have, indeed, been going badly.

The impression one carries away here is that Jesus is as thoroughly exasperated with life on Earth as any one of us might be, for instance, on returning from holiday or retreat only to find our house had been burgled! For us it’s a lesson in humility and self-acceptance: during time away from the reality of life our feet may have left the ground, and it’s almost a blessing in itself when something happens to foist reality back in our faces.

Jesus gets down to business and explains later to the disciples who have been left behind that they were, after all, not really at fault at all. On the surface it simply looks like Jesus not quite able to effect the necessary transition from spiritual top gear to slamming on the breaks: perhaps, also, the Evangelists is signalling that the God-man has re-entered [merely] human existence?

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JOHN MASON NEALE was born in London, the son of a clergyman, in 1818, and died in 1866 aged 48.

Although he was probably the finest scholar of his year at Trinity College Cambridge, he was unable to sit for an honours degree because of his poor mathematics. At age 22 Neale became Chaplain of Downing College. He was ordained in 1842, and became Rector at Crawly very briefly, but had to resign due to chronic lung disease. The following winter he was compelled to live abroad for his health.

The John Mason after whom Neale was named, was a puritan hymn-writer of whom Neale’s mother Susanna was a descendant, but Neale himself was very much associated with high churchmanship and fell under the influence of the Oxford Movement.

Apart from his fame as hymn-writer and translator of early and mediaeval Greek, Russian, Syrian and Latin hymns, he was also interested in church architecture and did what he could by means of the Ecclesiastical Society, which he helped to found, with its aim, to increase people’s awareness of image and formal religious ornament in churches: he was closely associated with the Gothic revival.

In 1846 Neale became Warden of Sackville College, an alms house, an appointment he kept until his death.

In 1853 Neale co-founded the Society of St Margaret, a religious order dedicated to looking after the sick; but many Protestants were suspicious of any kind of religious order in the Anglican Church, and in 1857, at the funeral of one of the sisters, he was attacked and mauled: crowds threatened to stone him or to burn his house.

He received no honour or preferment during his life: His Doctorate of Divinity was awarded later by an American university. Neale was also the principal founder of the Anglican & Eastern Association, which became the Anglican & Eastern Orthodox Association in 1864. The result of this organisation was ‘The Hymns of the Eastern Church,’ edited by Neale and published in 1865.

Neale’s determined high churchmanship attracted opposition, including a 14-year inhibition by his bishop, but he translated the Eastern Liturgy, and wrote a mystical commentary on the Psalms; but his contribution to the church of today is as a hymn-writer and translator of a number of Greek, Russian, Syrian and Latin hymns, 58 of which appeared in Hymns Ancient and Modern in the 1875 edition, and 63 The English Hymnal Of 1906.

Among his best-known translations are:

* A great and mighty wonder
* O come O come Emanuel
* Of the Father’s love begotten
* All glory laud and honour
* Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle
* To thee before the close of day
* Ye sons and daughters of the King

The melody of ‘Good King Wenceslas, which Neale unearthed originates from a Latin springtime poem ‘Tempus Adest Floridum.’

John Mason Neale seems to have achieved a great deal for the wider church during a short and rather sad life, disadvantaged as he was by poor health, early academic set-backs and quite unreasoning opposition not only from crowds, from whom it may have been anticipated, but by a bishop who, perhaps, found him awkward to pigeon-hole.

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ST DOMINIC and ST FRANCIS are venerated as the founders of the two principal orders of friars, almost simultaneously in the early C13. Everyone knows about St Francis, and the immense foundation at Assisi built in his name, although perhaps against his wishes, proclaims that ‘This was a very great saint.’

Visit San Petronio, the most prestigious church in Bologna, on the other hand, and you’ll find the tomb of St Dominic half-way along the south wall, beautifully worked, but somehow not particularly striking, and perhaps even something of an anti-climax.

Dominic has a serious public relations deficit thanks largely to the myth that he founded the inquisition, whereas it wasn’t until ten years after his death that the Pope set up the inquisition in Italy, and later in France. There is a painting of Dominic supervising public burning of a heretic, which has nothing to do with reality. Additionally, it was soon realised that a pun on the name ‘Dominican’ almost translated the Latin ‘Domini canis – Dog of God. ‘

Actually, however, both Dominic and Francis responded to God’s calling in their own fashion; Francis confirms the stereotype that the Italians are a nation of actors of whom only the least talented end up on the stage. Dominic seems to have been intelligent, imaginative and visionary, particularly where it mattered, in his ability to deal with reality and respond to God’s calling in any given situation to the utmost of his ability: is there anything that God values more in a servant?

A moment’s reflection on the Dominican tradition, however, should put them fairly and squarely on the historical, intellectual and spiritual map: Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, and more recently Matthew Fox are intellectual stars of the order: St Catherine of Siena was a 3rd-order Dominican, though her seniors didn’t always know what to do with her! It was the Dominican order that introduced the rosary as an aid to prayer; Bartolome de las Casas, and Gustavo Gutiérrez [he of Liberation theology] arose from the Dominican Justice tradition: Fra Angelico the painter was the prior of San Marco in Florence, where Girolamo Savonarola was publicly hanged and burnt in the Piazza Signoria there in 1492[!]

The Dominicans were founded as an order of preachers: anybody who could persuade the prosperous and worldly Florentines to give up their treasured possessions to the flames of the public bonfires of the vanities must have known his trade. Savonarola’s grizzly fate came about because his preaching got under the skin of one of the most corrupt and venial popes in history, Alexander VI, the infamous Borgia; so he was simply doing his job rather too well for his own good!

There is more than enough literature around on the subject of Meister Eckhart, but in 2018 Penguin brought out a study by Joel F Harrington called ‘Dangerous Mystic:’ whilst giving a useful resume of Eckhart’s life and achievements, the book affords a step-by-step account of the Dominican training and way of life 50 years or so after the order’s foundation.

Dominic de Guzman was probably born around 1170 in the small Castilian village of Caleruega, where his father was the ‘squire.’ His mother, who was beatified, had a vision whilst carrying her son, of a black and white dog with a fiery torch in his mouth; something that has become one of Dominic’s attributes. The legend was meant to show that he would set the world alight.

Round about the age of 7 Dominic was entrusted to an uncle who was an arch-priest, for basic education; and at 14 he was sent to the University of Palencia, where he studied what was known in the middle ages as ‘the liberal arts’ and theology: he also distinguished himself in charity: during a famine in the town he sold everything, including his precious manuscripts, to help the starving poor, telling his fellow students ‘How can I read from dead skins when there are living skins dying of starvation?’

Having come to the notice of Bishop Diego de Acebo, who was then in charge of the Cathedral at Osma, Dominic was taken into the community of Augustinian canons, where he remained until, at age 33, he was chosen to accompany Diego on a diplomatic mission to Denmark. On their way they encountered three senior Cistercian monks who had been deputed by Pope Innocent III to combat and supress the Albigensian heresy and its adherents, who were spreading rapidly.

The Albigensians were a gnostic and dualistic sect, wishing to pursue a life of apostolic poverty. There were two classes of adherents: the ‘believers,’ who supported the ‘Perfects,’ who were thought to have attained the highest degree of spiritual and ethic perfection, so that they dispensed with the notion of sin and any idea that they might need to be forgiven. This is, of course, a gross oversimplification, but it should be evident that these beliefs and the resulting way of life had departed radically from anything a mainstream Christian might be able to support today.

There was a wide P R gap between the Albigensians, who aimed at a simple ‘apostolic’ lifestyle, and that of the prelates, richly attired, riding the finest horses and attended by a retinue of servants. They weren’t doing very well.

On their way back from Denmark Bishop Diego and Dominic encountered the three Cistercians again, still bewildered by their lack of success in combating the Albigensians, so Diego took them in hand; telling them to send their attendants away; give their rich clothes to the poor and travel on foot.

Diego had to return to his diocese but he left Dominic to organise the small band of preachers, which he did, without, however, achieving much more than before, except that he managed to set up a convent for the few women who had been reclaimed for Christianity. When one of the papal emissaries was assassinated, however, Pope Innocent lost patience and called for an armed crusade to supress the Albigensians by force. Dominic and his band were entirely against this stratagem, which didn’t help their work in the least.

Diego had intended to return to Dominic’s aid, but in 1207 he died, and the Cistercians withdrew, leaving Dominic high and dry. The military campaign went on until 1255, decades after Dominic’s death, but in the meantime, with his back against the ropes, he had, at least, managed to attract a small group of like-minded preachers around him; and two other bishops, particularly Foulques of Toulouse, who assigned the fledgling band a house for the converted women, and a church from which to work.

Dominic and his disciples had clearly failed in their project to bring round the Albigensians by persuasion, and the military campaign rather put the lid on any prospect of success, but from it all Dominic and his supporters took courage, and realised that there was a need for a group dedicated to effective preaching and teaching. When Foulques accompanied Dominic to Rome to seek papal approval for a diocesan-wide licence for the group to preach, Pope Innocent shocked both men by suggesting they should carry their work throughout the whole of Christendom rather than just confining it to the diocese.

With the social and economic upheavals of the early 12th century, various new sects and groups were arising, not all of them heretics, but at the 4th Lateran Council of 1215 the Bishops, seriously concerned about losing their power and influence, passed a resolution prohibiting the foundation of any new orders; Francis only just made it in time.

Himself a renowned preacher, and probably the most powerful pope since Gregory the Great at the turn of the 7th century, Innocent was open to church reform, and, with his hands tied like this, and unable to approve a new order as such, he simply instructed Dominic to come back to him once he and his companions had decided on which of the existing monastic rules to adapt to their needs, or vice versa; and he would guarantee to licence them.

For ten years Dominic had lived contentedly as an Augustinian canon at Osma, so he persuaded his followers that this was a flexible and democratic rule. The original Augustinian community had simply been a group of Augustine’s friends living together in his home, and headed up by him. There was a rule of prayer, but the order was not enclosed, and, while a version of the monastic hours were kept, contemplation, study and preaching replaced the manual labour normal in a Benedictine house, but these were mendicant – begging – friars, who abjured the ownership of property and took a vow of chastity.

On Dominic’s return to Rome, he found Innocent had died, and his successor, Honorius III, knew nothing of Dominic or his agreement with his predecessor.

After several visits to Rome, Honorius licenced the order at the end of 1216, not yet known as the Dominicans – simply ‘an order of preachers, dedicated to mission and the salvation of souls.

Dominic then did something completely off the wall, which could have brought the project to a juddering halt: quite against the protests of his followers, he ordered them to disperse across Europe and set up satellite groups of their own. His followers objected vociferously, but Dominic insisted that he knew what he was doing. In Paris the order was received with outright hostility, as had been the Franciscans, because nobody there wanted to give space to any other start-up group, but in Germany and Italy things went much better.

Honorius assigned the new order facilities in Rome, where they set up their headquarters, until moving to Bologna, to replace Reginald, one of his chief emissaries, who moved to Paris and achieved a break-through at last.

Dominic died aged 51 in 1221, apparently exhausted by his arduous work and his ascetic lifestyle. By this time he had set up an order of cloistered nuns; another of women who supported the preachers; a third order of lay men and women oblates; and by the end of the century the order had been established not only in Europe, but the ‘black friars’ had made it as far away as Baghdad.

The Dominican ‘nine ways of prayer’ can be found on several websites, but are too long and complex to quote here.

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MARY SUMNER [1828-1921] married a young curate at age 20 who was the nephew of Archbishop Sumner, who himself became Bishop of Guilford. She was encouraged to found THE MOTHERS’ UNION in her husband’s parish near Winchester in 1876, after the birth of her first grandchild, mindful as she was of her own difficulties around motherhood.

Nowadays perhaps we think of the Mothers’ Union as the acme of Victorian piety, but there was an aching need for support for the individual mother, even if, perhaps, it may not have been as explicit as today’s TV ads.

With TV adverts dramatizing a young mum unaware that motherhood might bring on incontinence as a result of child-bearing, it’s hard to realise that in 1876, when the appalling Maggie Smith character in ‘Downton Abbey’ would have been young, she could advise her daughter, mother of an illegitimate child, that: ‘In my day women only experienced sexual feelings when ordered to do so by their mothers!’ Of course that’s an inspired comic line, but the fact remains that the ideal of motherhood imposed by men on women found it expedient to pass over inconvenient emotions such as post-natal depression or the occasional absence of ‘maternal’ feelings altogether, and many women seemed content to acquiesce in this status quo.

It was the Women’s Institute that regained a bit of street cred by taking Tony Blair apart some years ago, but the Mothers’ Union, whose membership is not exclusively mothers today – male single parents welcome – campaigns against domestic violence, and for employers to adapt working hours and conditions increasingly to accommodate the needs of working mums.

‘Sumner wanted to bring mothers of all social classes together to provide support for one another and to be trained in motherhood, which she saw as a vocation’.

In 1885 Roland Wilberforce, the first Bishop of Newcastle, was preparing to address church-going women at the Portsmouth congress. Realising that he had nothing relevant to say, to church women, he contacted Mary Sumner and asked her to stand in! She was nervous, but found herself addressing the women passionately about the power of mothers to change the nation for the better. A number of women present were encouraged to return to their parishes and set up similar meetings, and the Bishop of Winchester who presided over the congress, declared that the Mothers’ Union become a diocesan organisation.

In 1893 annual general meetings of the Union were instigated and in 1896 a General Council was set up, with Mary Sumner appointed unanimously as President a post she held until her 90’s. She lived to see the first overseas conference of the movement in 1920.

‘The growth of the movement beyond the diocese of Winchester was due to the emphasis in Victorian British society on morality, and contending with social ills, as well as the growth in Anglican mission throughout the British Empire. By 1892 there were 60,000 members in 28 dioceses which grew to 169,000 by the end of the century.’

The website will continue by telling you that the vast majority of members of the Mothers’ Union now reside in former commonwealth countries, particularly India and Africa, and it’s encouraging to know that part of the modern business is micro finance, but other projects include literacy and development; Mothers’ Union is part of ‘Make Poverty History.’ It is also represented nowadays at the United Nations, where it speaks out on gender equality, among other issues.

In these days of identity politics and the fast-developing ‘war of all against all,’ it is important that those who support ‘traditional values’ still have a spiritual home, shorn, thank heaven, of the odour of sanctity that surrounded it until quite recently. Experience warns us that to leave any conservative-leaning group behind in contempt only breeds anger and resentment, and, like the church itself, the Mothers’ Union has demonstrated, no doubt through the intake of new blood, its capacity, through the action of the Spirit, to move with the times.