**In the Embrace of Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Last month, I found myself in the hot mid-May sun of St. Peter’s Square, gathered with tens of thousands to witness the canonization of ten new saints. After a too-long pandemic hiatus, the Square was filled with jubilant celebration.

The banners bearing the pictures of the soon-to-be canonized were hung, as is tradition, from the façade of St. Peter’s. As I sat in the Square looking at their pictures, waiting for Mass to begin, and leafing through the biographies in my program, I was struck by how utterly different their ten paths to sanctity had been.

They hailed from France, India, Italy, and the Netherlands. They were born as early as 1544 and died as recently as 1955. During those four centuries, they were founders of religious congregations with charisms as diverse as education, promoting vocations, and caring for orphans. They were missionaries who left their homelands, a monk, and a scholarly journalist. Some were martyred in the most violent of deaths, and some died at peace. No two of them lived their lives in the same way. No two of them could have lived their lives in the same way.

Yet, as Pope Francis said in his homily for their canonization Mass, “The path of holiness… is universal. … Let us strive to follow it, for each of us is called to holiness, to a form of holiness all its own.”

As we celebrated ten sisters and brothers in faith, we celebrated the unique and holy paths that brought all of *them* to the eternal loving embrace of God.

I looked around at the crowd of all who celebrated with me. We too hailed from many nations and were as diverse a throng as one could hope to find anywhere in the world. I heard so many languages spoken, and saw infants in their mothers’ arms, elders with canes and walkers, children with matching hats, choirs singing songs both familiar and foreign, young couples holding hands, and members of religious communities whose habits ran a sartorial spectrum I have rarely encountered.

As we waited for Mass to begin, there were those who bowed their heads with silent devotion, those who prayed their rosaries in community, groups with banners of all kinds, and those who cheered with forgivably irreverent glee when the name of a soon-to-be saint from their own homeland was invoked. There were also, as always, those who fought over seats, cut the lines, yelled at those who cut the lines, and snapped at security guards.

Yet, there we all were, seated in the middle of St. Peter’s Square within the stony embrace of Bernini’s colonnade that encircled us all. Perhaps this was a foretaste of the eternal loving embrace of God, the hope that all of us shared. There were, by some accounts, 45,000 of us gathered there -- with 45,000 unique and irreplaceable paths of holiness. As Pope Francis said that day, God has “a plan of love for everyone.”

As we honored ten sisters and brothers in faith, we celebrated the way that there is also a unique and holy path to bring each of *us* to the eternal loving embrace of God.

Later, at night, I returned to Saint Peter’s Square in the darkness alone. That has always been my favorite time to be there – a chance to think quietly and ponder all that has happened there for almost two millennia. Pigeons circled the obelisk as they have done through the ages. Guards kept silent vigil and occasional tourists would pass through the silent square. However, it was mostly pigeons --- and me. Again, I found myself in the embrace of the Bernini columns in a square that seemed so quiet without the throngs of the daytime festivities. In the shadows of St. Peter’s surrounded by the ancient colonnade, I felt very small in the best possible way.

As I remembered ten sisters and brothers in faith, I celebrated the way that there is also a unique and holy path to bring *me* to the eternal loving embrace of God.

Discerning it is the task of a lifetime – and the task of every day. Having the strength and the wisdom to do it is the prayer of a lifetime – and the prayer of every day in ordinary time.

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