DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR

A Saint of Our Own: How the Quest for a Holy Hero Helped Catholics Become American

by Kathleen Sprows Cummings

Is there a saint—American or otherwise—whose story resonates with you? Why? Is there a prospective saint whose canonization you are particularly hoping for? If so, if you were given the chance to testify in their cause, what arguments would you make about their relevance?

A Saint of Our Own uses stories of the saints to explore broader questions about who societies and communities remember and why. If it is true that studying saints often reveals more about the people promoting the saints than it does about the saints themselves, how might this translate to other ways we recognize heroes—i.e. federal and state holidays, monuments, history books?

One theme of A Saint of Our Own involves change over time: what is perceived as heroic or saintly in one era may be frowned upon or even condemned by the members of subsequent generations. Does America’s racial reckoning, for example, impact your views of Katharine Drexel’s sanctity?

One of the ways this book is distinguished from other studies of canonization is through its emphasis on the saint seekers as opposed to the saint makers. What is the distinction and is it a useful one? Does the book include enough information about the canonization process itself? Or perhaps too much?!

Discuss the book’s argument that saints often serve as connectors of various kinds: linking heaven and earth, local Catholic communities and the universal church in Rome, private devotion and public ritual, religious belief and American patriotism.

The book won first prize in the “Gender Issues” category from the Catholic Press Association. Discuss the contributions this book makes to the study of women and gender in the Catholic Church.
In 2020 Colorado officially renamed Columbus Day “Cabrini Day,” in honor of Mother Frances Cabrini (becoming the first state to name an official paid holiday after a woman). Do you think other states—or perhaps even the federal government—should follow suit? Why or why not?

Discuss the cover of A Saint of Our Own. How well does it convey the book’s argument? Is the prominence of Elizabeth Ann Seton, on the cover and throughout the narrative, justified? Were there other saints you wanted to learn more about?

This book was published a year before the murder of George Floyd. How might the epilogue be changed given this moment in this history of American race relations? Should the causes of Augustus Tolton, Mother Mary Lange, Pierre Toussaint, and other Black Catholics be accelerated in this moment, as this article suggests with reference to the cause for canonization of Thea Bowman?