

Calling in the Specialist Saints and Healing in Boston's North End

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DID I SHOW YOU what Father gave me? Look!" Carla unclasped the black leather handbag nestled in her lap. Peering into its dark recesses, she flipped through its contents like a researcher through so many files and withdrew a clutch of softly colored papers. With a subtle flourish, she dealt each item onto the brushed chrome café tabletop so I could inspect her new collection. I immediately recognized the first rectangle as an object familiar from my Catholic childhood: a holy card. "St. Peregrine, see?" she directed. "And look, St. Peregrine." There was a bookmark, and a second holy card enclosed with a three-inch metallic statuette in a plastic pouch. "And this is the novena, see? St. Peregrine."

The uniform image was repeated on each object and reflected again on the oval laminated button now pinned to her colorful, striped silk shirt. Picture a white-haired monk lifting the hem of his robe to reveal an ulcerating shin wound. This affliction identifies the image as the thirteenth-century Italian, Peregrine Laziosi, the patron saint of persons with cancer. A carved wooden statue in his image was recently commissioned and installed at St. Leonard of Port Maurice Church on Hanover Street.

Carla's new cache was gratefully received, I'm sure, though the circumstances are hardly auspicious. Carla, a parishioner at St. Leonard's, is seventy-nine, and she has breast cancer. This is the third cancer for which she is being treated. Claims Carla, "I'm in remission, but I still take a chemotherapy pill. Three cancers. But I'm still here. God must want me around for something."

I'm not surprised. Who wouldn't want Carla around? After nearly three months of weekly visits to the women of the Eucharistic Prayer Group of St. Leonard's Church, I've come to appreciate Carla's vivaciousness, quick wit, strength, and devotion. With archetypically Latin generosity and warmth, Carla welcomed me early in my project to investigate spirituality and healing among Italian Catholics

in the North End. Carla herself is not Italian, but Spanish, married to an Italian. She is one of a small core of devout women who come together weekly for a special set of religious services with the intention of praying for divine intercession on behalf, as they say, of "myself, my family, my country, my world." Their intentions are widely conceived to be prayers for healing: from illness, grief, marital strife, separation from God. It's a practice they learned from their mothers and their grandmothers, but many have been unable to pass it on: some are childless; others have only sons.

While the women I will refer to attend Mass and pray the rosary daily as individuals, on Tuesday nights they come together as a socially organized group to pray, first in silent devotion before the Blessed Sacrament and then to recite the rosary aloud, together. Later, a priest joins them in the sanctuary to celebrate Mass and then leads them in a devotion to St. Anthony—a specialized set of prayers for the saint's intercession, followed by the presentation of, and blessing with, a holy relic, in this case a small chip of St. Anthony's bone nestled in a bed of white cotton and encased in a silver picture frame.

When I began this project, my interviews with parish priests confirmed that the Catholic Church teaches that all healing comes from God and, as is forthrightly proclaimed, "Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." It is through the Church's sacraments that the faithful receive God's supernatural grace and healing mercy. For example, through confession—the sacrament of reconciliation—one is reconciled with God. That is, one is no longer separated from God by sin. There is a healing of one's relationship with God and, thus, of one's self.

Yet, the churches are full of statues of saints. Two of the Italian churches in the North End publicize weekly saint devotions through their bulletins: a St. Jude Novena on Mondays at Sacred Heart, and a Devotion to St. Anthony after all Masses at St. Leonard's on Tuesdays. I was interested in learning

what devotees perceived the role of saints in healing to be, and I decided to focus on the Tuesday evening services at St. Leonard's. While this paper does not review formal theological perspectives on the cult of saints and healing,¹ it does reflect some of the narrative, concrete, and personal expressions of the devout women of the Eucharistic Prayer Group, like Carla's succinct explanation of the intercession of saints: "It's like this," she explained. "If I wanted to get a job where you work, you could go to your boss for me. I could go to your boss, but it would just be better if you went to your boss. See?"

During the winter months, when it is too expensive to heat the large sanctuary of the main church for more than weekend Masses, the Tuesday evening services are held in the low-ceilinged basement chapel named for the popular saint of healing, Anthony of Padua. When I arrived an hour before the start of the 7:30 P.M. Mass, I discovered a handful of women in their mid-fifties to eighties, scattered singly among the wooden pews, kneeling silently in prayerful attention to the exposed Blessed Sacrament. There was no priest in sight, though one had probably lit the incense, releasing the sinuous dance of gray smoke now rising from a silver censor. He must have placed the golden monstrance—an elaborate, glass-faced shrine designed to display a consecrated Host for veneration by the faithful—on the altar and then left the women to their devotions. The women prayed amid red, electric votive candles flickering in tiered banks along the side walls and numerous boldly painted plaster saints resting in special niches above and to the sides of the marble altar. I mentally scanned the rich hagiography stored in my parochial school-trained memory for the attributes that would reveal the saints' identities: the Sacred Heart, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the chapel's eponymous St. Anthony among them.

At just 7:00 P.M., Tina turned around and whispered something to Theresa sitting in the pew behind her. Then she motioned with three fingers to Carla who nodded from across the aisle. Next she signaled Sophie with four, mouthing the word "fourth" for emphasis. Finally, she made eye contact with a fifth woman, holding up her full open hand. Tina had just assigned each woman to lead one decade of the rosary, a prescribed set of thirteen prayers in honor of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

A participant observer, I knelt with the other women and took out a set of rosary beads that had been a gift to me as a teenager from close Jewish friends returning from a trip to Jerusalem. I would be kneeling for longer than I'd anticipated. Before the five decades of the rosary were recited, Tina led

the group in a dedication. First pledging to say the rosary daily with family or friends or alone, the group asked for Mary's intercession with Jesus on behalf of their prayerful requests for healing.

"Let us pray for one another," intoned Tina.

The ensemble replied, reading from their blue prayer sheets: "Lord Jesus we place before you our prayer list for individuals who need and ask for your help. Holy Spirit enter their bodies so they may be healed."

Tina continued, "We also include the following names."

With that introduction, Tina commenced reading from a handwritten list in her dog-eared stenographer's notebook the names of more than 150 people. Certainly, it is a recognized practice to dedicate prayers or Masses for the intentions of named individuals, but I had never before encountered such a long litany. After that impressive recitation, the group incanted generalized intentions for the aged and lonely, the infirm and terminally ill, those who are suffering with AIDS, those embittered and in hatred, and more. The women also pray for scores of people whose requests are nominated on letters mailed to or dropped off at the church rectory and then gathered in a basket and placed on the floor before the altar. These petitions are never added to Tina's list. Her list grows with personal contact: a phone call is made, a slip of paper with a name is pressed into her hand at the back of church, or, as I experienced one evening, a conversation is had over coffee at Café Vittoria on Hanover Street.

We filed into the warm, cozy smell of brewing coffee, heading directly to a smaller rear room off the main café. Three round, chrome café tables had already been pushed together in anticipation of the group's arrival. As foamy cappuccinos and strong espressos were served, Frances complimented Carla on her hair, a dark sweep brushed back from her well-made-up face and caught in a wide, red headband. Carla replied, "This is the first night without my wig! It grew back in clumps, just the way it fell out! In clumps!"

Their conversation caught my attention. I shared that my stepdaughter was undergoing chemotherapy for Hodgkin's disease and was concerned about her thinning hair. Sympathetic murmurings bubbled up from those within earshot. Carla advised against using that "stuff for men they advertise on TV," a kind of hair product that sprays an adhesive, textured material onto the scalp. "I'm still trying to get it out!" she warned. Then Theresa called to Tina at the far end of the tables, "Tina! Do you have Amy on your list?"

"Who?"

"Rosemary's daughter, Amy. She has Hodgkin's. Put her on the prayer list!"

It was done. The next week I listened as Amy's name was recited before the praying of the rosary, her health and well-being now a concern shared with this devout community. Each week, as I heard new names added after Amy's, I experienced a sense of being cared for by these women who hardly knew me and had never met Amy. This is what they do, and I am inspired by their devout response to the need for healing, even in strangers.

I am also inspired by Carla's energy and her commitment to her neighbors, some of whom she visits daily at the local nursing home. "You go to the nursing home every day?" I asked, amazed.

"Yes. And I go to Mass every day except one. Guess which day."

I guessed, "Sunday?"

"Sunday!"

"Then what do you do on Sunday?" I was curious to know.

"I bring people from the nursing home to my house for dinner. I invite some people over and they come." She described her guests shuffling over with their walkers and being pushed in wheelchairs by younger residents, who, from her characterization, likely suffer with Alzheimer's.

"Are you a good cook?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm a good feeder!"

Carla often expresses herself in exclamation marks. Her short, staccato, statements are filled with an energy that belies her physical trials. Her personality is one that might easily demand center stage, but rarely does. She takes her turn during this social time, allowing the other women to share their week's news, much of which I miss because, sitting between Carla and Theresa, I'm usually attending to their exchanges, notable for their clues about personal ritual practice.

"Theresa," asked Carla, "should I keep lighting a candle for you? Did you find a job yet?"

"No, not yet," sighed Theresa.

I wondered aloud if Carla was lighting candles for anyone else.

"Oh, for this one and that one. I say one Hail Mary for one person, and two for another. . . . I light a lot of candles. But I have a very sensitive smoke detector. I tried putting all the candles in the kitchen sink," she told me, "but it still went off. . . . I finally just put them outside on the porch!"

Lighting candles and saying accompanying prayers for someone are natural parts of Carla's spiritual practice vocabulary, a vocabulary shared

among the aging women who go for coffee together. I once asked Carla why she participates in this group and I asked about her sense of its relationship to healing. She thought for a moment before answering with the qualification that she has a great devotion to St. Joseph and loves the Madonna by her myriad names, especially Our Lady of Guadeloupe. Still, she started attending the Tuesday prayer group and St. Anthony devotion services in 1991.

"It's a little selfish," she began. Her son had been sent to Iraq during the Gulf War and had been wounded almost immediately. "I heard that this group had just been formed, so I came to pray for my son. I was praying for him and I felt everyone else was praying for him, too." After her son returned, healed, to the United States, she kept attending the prayer group, and now she prays for others who need or request her prayers. "I'm a good pray-er." A few weeks later she would expand on this story.

Carla, Theresa, and I squeezed around a single table in the back room of the café. The others had excused themselves, invoking tiredness or Easter holiday preparations. Carla's usual animation seemed dampened, the light dulled behind her normally flashing dark eyes. Was everything "OK" with her, I asked. Carla told me what Theresa already knew, that she had spent the night before at the hospital because she felt "really bad, terrible." Her doctor had put her on a new medication that had left her feeling listless and nauseous, worse than any intravenous chemo she had ever been on. "But I made him send me home," she announced victoriously. "It's Holy Week! I have to be home!"

I marveled anew at Carla's good humor, energy, and perseverance and tried to probe their relationship, if any, to her devotion to St. Anthony.

"Remember I told you that I started to come to the prayer group when my son was hurt in the Gulf War? There's a part I didn't tell you." She paused, as if weighing whether to continue. "I was so angry at God! So angry. Hadn't I been through enough? Hadn't I accepted enough already without answering back?" I recalled some of Carla's sad history. Her mother died giving birth to her. Her father had sent her to be raised by nuns in her native Spain before he was murdered. Four of her children were stillborn. And then her beloved son was wounded. She continued, "I went into the church . . . it was empty . . . and went right up to the altar and shook my fist and yelled at God: "My name is not Job, God! Do I look like Job? Well, I'm not Job!"

Father Primo, then the pastor, must have entered the sanctuary during her tirade. When she was

through he started clapping, relieved, he told her, that at least she was still talking to God, even if she was shouting at Him. The understanding priest encouraged her to join the newly formed prayer group. "I didn't know what else to do, so I started to come. I never told anyone this before." And how it heals her, she says, is that it gives her the strength to bear all she is asked to bear. "I couldn't stand it otherwise."

Carla cast her words like a lifeline, her confession an offer of hope that the dark night of soul can pass. Her story of spiritual healing was a rich gift I am honored to have bestowed upon me.

"What else do you want to know!" Carla offered me one more chance to really "get it" about saints.

I ought to have been humbly silenced. Instead, I followed up on a conversation I had had with Theresa and Carla about the "particularness" they mentioned of having a spiritual friendship with a special saint, versus the universal communion of saints referred to in the Catholic Apostles' Creed.

"So," I ventured, "if St. Anthony is an effective healing saint, why has St. Peregrine been added to the church's panoply of saints?" Carla recapitulated what I had heard earlier from the church pastor, that he had commissioned the Italian-carved statue in response to the perceived increase of people with cancer within their community.

"Have you seen it yet?" Carla wanted to know. I hadn't. She shot me a look that suggested I was probably hopeless as a researcher. "Go look. Look in his eyes, look at all of them" she instructed. That's how I finally would understand the appeal of the saints, she suggested. If I would just go look at the various statues, Carla assured me, I would find a

saint that would "speak" to me. At the very least, I would find one in whom I would want to confide. For many of the women of St. Leonard's, I suspect that Carla's direction would make complete sense, would ring true to their experience. For Carla, I believe that Peregrine's distinctive reputation as a specialist, as the patron saint of persons with cancer, is what reached her faithful imagination more than an expression in his eyes.

The following week I waited after services as Carla stopped to pray before the newly installed St. Peregrine statue. As she knelt, she said to me, "You can see every vein in his hand. See?" She silently raised her gaze to the warm brown eyes of the wooden statue. She stroked St. Peregrine's bandaged leg and then touched her fingers to her lips, as if to seal her prayer with a devout kiss. I was filled with gratitude that this generous survivor could find such comfort in her belief, such healing in her faithful devotion. While I never heard the sought-for stories of "miraculous cures" alluded to by the parish priest when I began this project, I learned of a more pragmatic kind of healing. Through spiritual practice and community, Carla and the other women of the Tuesday evening Eucharistic Prayer Group find the strength they need to bear the burdens of their lives.

Notes

1. For a thorough theological articulation of the cult of the saints in the Catholic Church, see Paul Molinari, *Saints: Their Place in the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965). See also Robert Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).