

Saint Oswald
Lived During 604–642 A.D.

A major shift in the spiritual life occurs when we stop doing prayer and start giving ourselves to prayer.

Giving yourself to prayer means showing up and letting God do what he wants to do with you during that time of prayer. It means letting go of expectations and agendas for our time with God. It means detachment from the feelings that prayer provokes within us.

This shift requires us to surrender to the experience and to believe that God is working in us even when it feels like we are not accomplishing anything. It is about enjoying some carefree timelessness with God.

Saint Oswald spent his youth in exile among Irish and Scottish monks, where he learned to give himself to prayer. It ended up being the most important period in his life, even before he became the most powerful king of Britain.

Born around 604 AD into the royal line of Northumbria (one of the kingdoms of medieval England), Oswald's early life was marked by tumult after the death of his father, King Helfrich. Threatened by rival kings, Oswald sought refuge among the Scottish and Irish monks on the island of Iona.

During his time in Iona, Oswald not only converted to Christianity, but fell in love with Catholic spirituality. The monks, living under the rule of Saint Columba, practiced a form of Catholicism deeply rooted in prayer, meditation, and community life. Every day, Oswald watched monks give themselves totally to prayer whether or not it was convenient, simply because they loved God. And Oswald did the same. He gave himself to prayer.

When Oswald reached the age of 30, it was time to fulfill his duty to family and reclaim the English throne. He led an army into battle in 634 AD, and was victorious. One of his first acts as king was to invite Aidan, a monk from Iona, to establish a monastery there. This monastery played a major role in the conversion of England.

Oswald never stopped giving himself to prayer, not even as he died. While defending his people in the Battle of Maserfield against pagan invaders, he was struck down. As enemy soldiers closed in on him, he started praying for their souls. His final breath was a prayer.

Saint Oswald knew what it meant to give yourself to prayer.

The shift from doing prayer to giving ourselves to prayer may seem subtle, but the reality is, this is one of the most significant inner changes that can take place in our souls.

Saint Hormisdas
Lived During 450–523 A.D.

How do you handle conflicts? Do you immediately assume that whoever doesn't agree with you isn't on your side?

We all tend to get defensive when our position seems to be under attack. Jesus' words are especially important during these moments: "Whoever is not against us is for us." (Mark 9:40)

Saint Hormisdas had to take these words to heart when he unexpectedly became Pope during a time of schism.

Born in Frosinone, Italy, Hormisdas was initially married and had a son, who later became Pope Silverius. Following the death of his wife, he dedicated himself to the clergy, eventually being ordained a deacon in the Vatican. His reputation for diplomacy and composure under pressure eventually led to him being elected pope.

When Hormisdas became pope, he inherited a 30-year-long schism between the western and eastern branches of the Church. Essentially, it came down to a disagreement over whether the pope, the leader of the western branch, had final say on doctrinal differences with the patriarch, the leader of the eastern branch. The western and eastern branches were on the brink of declaring themselves different churches, as is unfortunately the case today.

Pope Hormisdas did not seek further conflict. He did not look at the eastern branch as heretics or even enemies. Instead, he reaffirmed that the Catholic Church truly is one church, and that the western and eastern branches were the two lungs of Catholicism.

He crafted the "Formula of Hormisdas," a profession of faith that affirmed the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. This document was pivotal, as it was eventually signed by all Eastern bishops, including the Patriarch of Constantinople, formally ending the schism in 519 AD.

Pope Hormisdas is now known as Saint Hormisdas because he did not condemn those who disagreed with him. Instead, he calmly and lovingly brought them back into the fold. He lived by Jesus' simple yet difficult words: "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Saint Mary MacKillop
Lived From 1842–1909 A.D.

Is it possible to be both faithful and critical? This is one of the enduring questions Christianity has grappled with from the beginning, though often unspoken. In a healthy community it is possible to be both faithful and critical. When a community or society is unhealthy and afraid, those who are critical tend to be accused of being unfaithful.

Mother Mary MacKillop was Australia's first canonized saint, and when she was canonized the secular media focused almost entirely on one incident from her life. After MacKillop had founded her school and religious congregation, the community's constitution was approved by the local bishop.

Several years later, the same bishop, under the influence of an overzealous vicar-general, sought to have the constitution changed. Mother MacKillop refused, pointing out that she and her sisters could be made homeless under the proposed changes. She was excommunicated for refusing, though an investigation later exonerated her. In the context of the times, as a woman in the late 1800s, standing up to the bishop and other church leaders as she did was a display of uncommon courage and boldness.

The saints demonstrate that it is possible to be both critical of the Church and faithful to it and to God. Some people correct and criticize out of jealousy and hatred, but the saints did so out of a deep love for God, his Church, and his people.

When criticism is automatically considered to be infidelity, it is a dark, unthinking time. This theme leads most people to think about their rights and responsibilities when it comes to challenging people in authority, but it is equally important for us to consider how we respond when we are corrected. Do we respond humbly and accept correction as an opportunity to become a-better-version-of-ourselves? Or do we hang on pridefully to our old selves?

Champions love coaching. They love to be corrected, because they know it will make them better. This is true in sports, business, relationships, and spirituality. It is true in every area of life. Are you coachable? Some people refuse correction and instruction. This is a sign of massive arrogance and mediocrity.

Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross
Lived 1891–1942 A.D.

It is popular these days to dismiss the idea of good and evil as the nonsense of another age. But evil exists. Our tendency is to think of evil as something far away. Until one day you turn the corner and there it is, and your life will never be the same.

The sad and tragic truth is that evil is never far away.

Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, also known as Edith Stein, experienced this truth firsthand in one of the most evil atrocities in all of human history.

Edith Stein was born into a devout Jewish family in Germany, on October 12, 1891. She was an intellectually gifted child who, by her adolescence, declared herself an atheist.

Her journey into academia led her to the University of Göttingen, where she completed her doctorate on the topic of empathy, which only became more important in her later religious vocation. Her conversion to Catholicism in 1922 was sparked by an encounter with the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, which revealed to her that intellectual pursuits and spirituality could go hand in hand.

As Nazism spread across Germany, Edith's dual identity as a Jew and a Catholic placed her in the crosshairs of escalating persecution. She didn't back down. Instead, she entered the Carmelite convent in 1933, adopting the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

The escalation of World War II forced Teresa Benedicta and her sister Rosa, also a convert, to relocate to a Carmelite monastery in the Netherlands for safety. But when a Dutch Bishop publicly condemned Nazi policies, the Gestapo retaliated by arresting Teresa and her sister and bringing them to Auschwitz.

One of the officials at Auschwitz was so impressed by Teresa Benedicta's peace and spiritual strength that he offered to help her escape. This was her response: "If somebody intervened at this point and took away my chance to share in the fate of my brothers and sisters, that would be utter annihilation."

Teresa Benedicta, her sister Rosa, and many others were executed in a gas chamber on August 9, 1942.

Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross never doubted the existence of good and evil. She chose the good, clung to the good, and brought the good to others in the worst of circumstances. Her life challenged the depths of evil with the profound power of faith and sacrifice.