

Saints' lives can help with spiritual perfectionism

Colleen Carroll Campbell felt responsible for the injury that landed her toddler son in the emergency room, and that it was her fault that she might go into labor right there in the hospital parking lot. (She didn't.) If only she wouldn't have done this errand or skipped that one, or if she would have served a later dinner and put away the laundry and cleaned the house ... and on and on.

If only she had done something different to change the sequence of events, her son would not have been hurt. She thought that her husband and God would be angry and would not forgive her; she didn't even deserve to be forgiven.

"Then for the first time in my life," she wrote in her latest book, "I think this: 'Someone should give that woman a break.'" It was a turning point for Campbell – a significant step in the journey she was trying to make before she even knew where she was heading. She finally discovered that she was a perfectionist. Not just the kind who wanted to excel professionally – and she did – or in any other earthly way. She was a spiritual perfectionist.

Spiritual perfectionism



Colleen Carroll
Campbell

It is a toxic state of mind, she said, that cycles every aspect of life in pride, sin, shame, blame and despair, then robs the person of joy. And, she added, “It distances us from our one true hope for healing – God’s grace.” Campbell explores those issues in her recently released book, [“The Heart of Perfection: How the Saints Taught Me to Trade My Dream of Perfect For God’s”](#) (Howard Books, \$26).

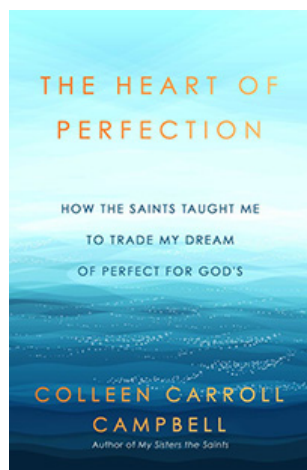
Her guide includes seven saints and one heretic who were spiritual perfectionists. They were models for her to explore her own awakening and get rid of the demands that she had imposed on herself since childhood.

It started with striving for perfect school work, then a perfect career and motherhood. It finally hit her that she was hurting her children, and she didn’t want to pass this on to them. Campbell, who lives in St. Louis with her husband and four children and is the author of “The New Faithful” and “My Sisters the Saints,” wasn’t at peace with what had happened with her faith, either. She says her perfectionism was linked to what she thought God demanded of her and what she believed she had to do to earn his love.

“And so I realized that spiritual perfectionism was the core

of my problems,” she said. “For a while I thought that meant that I should steer clear of these overachieving saints when I was seeking a solution.” Instead, she found inspiration and healing when she connected with them.

“The Heart of Perfection: How the Saints Taught Me to Trade My Dream of Perfect for God’s”



“An award-winning author, former presidential speechwriter, and mother of four weaves stories of her own struggles against comparison and impossible expectations with those of seven ex-perfectionist saints (and one heretic) who show us how to pursue a new kind of perfection: freedom in Christ.”

Source: Simon and Schuster

Help from the saints

She found some surprising and unfamiliar stories in her three-year research and writing about the saints. She found resources in old books at Georgetown University when she lived in Washington, D.C., and in the “musty bowels” of a library in St. Louis.

“I was surprised with every single one of the saints,” she said. “Francis of Assisi is a good example, because he was known for his radical poverty, his willingness to march off stark-naked from the confrontation with his father. So I think it’s natural to assume that the counterculture impulse was in him from the start. I was encouraged to discover that Francis

had a long road between the time he first felt God's call in his life until he fully came into his mission as an itinerant preacher of the Gospel."

Alphonsus Ligouri was on the brink of a breakdown from hypercritical parents and the worldview of a judgmental God. He found liberation in the Gospel and in discovering that Jesus came to save us, not scare us. "If you are afraid of God, go back to the Gospel and read what Jesus says about a loving heavenly Father," Campbell said. "That was really the turning point in his journey, that he found freedom from fear and freedom from perfectionism."

Thérèse of Lisieux had her dark night of the soul the last 18 months of her life. "We remember her cheerful demeanor in 'The Little Way,' but she was living a deep desolation at the end of her life," Campbell said. "It did not take away her deep-down joy, but it reminds us that this surrender to God is ongoing and will be until the day we die. The good news is that with surrender always comes greater freedom. That's what I saw over and over again in the lives of these saints, that there's freedom in Christ, which of course brings us joy."

The life of Francis de Sales emphasizes the link between doing God's will, a lesson that he taught St. Jane de Chantal, a harried single mother who was caught in perfectionism's loop of negative feedback. "Giving up control led Jane to a different freedom," Campbell said. "God is the author of freedom, so we don't lose anything when we turn our lives over to him. We gain everything."

Ignatius of Loyola, who was often discouraged and distracted with his perfectionism, wrote discernment rules that are still the gold standard for Christian decision-making.

All of the saints that she wrote about had a turning point when they surrendered to God.

This was not so for Angélique Arnaud, a 17th-century French

abbess and spiritual perfectionist who was a leader in the fearmongering theological movement known as Jansenism.

“She actually had some great qualities, but what she didn’t have was humility and the willingness to cooperate with God’s grace allowing him to heal her perfectionism,” Campbell said. “I dedicate a chapter to her because she isn’t a monster. She’s actually very recognizable and relatable in many ways, and her story is haunting. She wound up knee-deep in heresy and led scores of others off that cliff with her. That’s a dramatic example of what unrecovered perfectionism looks like.”

Campbell called it a “grace” to apply the insights to her own trials and errors. “I am a work in progress,” she said. “Head knowledge is one thing and heart knowledge is another and takes a lifetime to change.”

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For more information about Campbell’s story, visit colleen-campbell.com .