

SPECIAL
SAINTS
FOR
SPECIAL
PEOPLE

Stories of Saints
with Disabilities

MEGAN C. GANNON

FOREWORD BY MAUREEN PRATT, *author of Salt and Light:
Church, Disability, and the Blessing of Welcome for All*



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FOREWORD

When I was a child and very ill (many times!), I pored through the pages of a book on the saints. The lives I read about were very interesting and spiritually formational. But, among the many examples included in the rather thick book, none seemed very easy to relate to for me, a young Catholic with serious health problems.

Today, children (and adults) with disabilities are blessed to have Megan Gannon's *Special Saints for Special People*, a gem of a book that helps all of us, young or older, understand that persons with disabilities have been and are today called to service, holiness, and sainthood. Among these pages are inspiring, relatable examples of men and women who embraced their lives with personal challenges and answered God's call to service. And, just as inspiring is the insight provided by the author herself, who is no

stranger to disability, and who has also answered God's call, recognizing a need for such a volume and filling it wonderfully.

No matter our life challenges and no matter the calling God has given us, *Special Saints for Special People* is an encouraging companion as we, too, strive to bring our unique talents and gifts forward, in loving service to our awesome Creator!

MAUREEN PRATT, author of *Salt and Light: Church, Disability, and the Blessing of Welcome for All*

INTRODUCTION

AS A CHILD I NEVER HAD ANY SPECIAL DEVOTIONS TO SAINTS. Mass and the Rosary were part of our family routine, but I don't have any memory of praying to individual saints. This never bothered me or really even crossed my mind. I knew saints were in heaven watching over us and praying for us, but I couldn't really identify with them.

I was born with cerebral palsy. As a child I was just busy trying to be a "normal" kid, going to school, dictating my homework to my mother since I am unable to write, playing with my friends, and taking family vacations.

When I got older and had to choose a saint for my confirmation name, I started with names I liked and then read a little about the saints with those names. I didn't have a clue that there were saints who lived their whole lives with disabilities. And it never occurred to me to try

to research that. I did read that St. Teresa of Avila was disabled early in life and was cured through the intercession of St. Joseph, which I thought was cool. A priest happened to give a homily on her the day before I had to make my final decision, so I took that as a sign and chose her for my patron saint. I can't say I would have definitely chosen a saint with a disability even if I knew that was a possibility. Again, I was intent on trying to live like every other young person. On the other hand, I know I would have always turned to these saints in situations that only another disabled person would understand.

As I grew older, I learned of many other saints—like St. André Bessette and St. Padre Pio—who are known for healing others, and I began to realize some were credited with improving the lives of people who had a disability. St. Francis de Sales, for example, invented a sign language so he could communicate and pass on the faith to a deaf man he knew.

I still was completely unaware of saints who themselves were disabled. This is sort of funny to me, since throughout my whole life random people who didn't even know me would call me a saint. They could only see this girl in a wheelchair, unable to speak clearly, and totally dependent on others for almost everything. When I was very young, I hated to be looked at this way because I didn't think of myself as that different from anyone else. As I grew older, it didn't bother me as much, but I wondered why they would say I was a saint. After all, it was my family, friends,

teachers, and therapists who did everything for me and allowed me many of the same experiences that other children and young adults enjoyed. I am totally dependent on others for everything. I don't have very good control of my muscles, so I need help with things like eating, getting dressed, and taking a shower. My speech is also very hard to understand unless you are around me for a while, so I usually need a friend or family member to tell others what I'm saying. It is only with the aid of a very special computer that I am able to type by just using my eyes, since I don't have enough control over my hands to use a keyboard or mouse.

When I was in college, I had a good friend who had a relative with an intellectual disability. She asked me if I knew of any saints that her relative might be interested in knowing more about. We flipped through some saint books I had on a shelf but once again came up empty. I basically concluded there weren't any. It's not like people with disabilities are usually known for feeding the hungry, taking care of the sick, or spreading the Good News. More often than not, we are usually on the receiving end of others' works of mercy.

Only recently through the internet have I discovered there are many saints who were born with or who had disabilities most of their lives. For as long as I can remember, I have loved the saying that some attribute to Saint Mother Teresa, "What you are is God's gift to you. What you make of yourself is your gift to God." Most people accept their

disabilities. Sure, there are times when we wish we weren't disabled, and sure, we do often hope for a miracle, but if we stop to think about it, everyone wants to change something about themselves.

In this book, I have chosen to focus on some holy persons who accepted themselves and never received a miraculous cure. Some of these special saints may be known to you already. You may also meet some new saints. I have included a few that still are awaiting the approval of a second miracle before officially being recognized as a saint by the church. They are called blessed, and maybe they will be declared a saint by helping you.

Reading stories about saints is meant to inspire and encourage us. I hope these special saints do this for you. Enjoy!



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BLESSED MARGARET OF CASTELLO

*Patron of People Who Are Blind,
Deformed, Hunchbacked,
or Unwanted*

A LONG TIME AGO, IN 1287, THERE LIVED A BRAVE NOBLEMAN AND HIS WIFE. They lived in a castle called Metola, which is southeast of what is now Florence, Italy. They were very excited, because they were expecting a baby. They were hoping for a son to follow in his father's footsteps and become the next great military leader of their country, which is now part of Italy. They wanted all the people to share in their happiness when the baby was born, so they planned a great feast with many celebrations for everyone. The whole country was waiting to hear the good news. Bells were to be rung, everyone would stop working, and parties and festivals would start everywhere for people of all ages to enjoy.

The big day finally came, but there were no bells and no celebrations, and the feast was canceled. No one knew what was happening. In time they came to believe that the baby didn't live, and everyone was sad and disappointed. But sometimes what people think isn't what is actually true.

In fact, the noble lady did have her baby, but it was not at all what they were expecting. First, the baby was a girl, not a boy. That was a great disappointment, since a girl at that time couldn't become a military leader. But it was a lot more than that.

This baby was very different from most babies. One of her legs was much shorter than the other. Her face didn't look "pretty" as other babies' faces do. They soon realized she was blind. She was smaller than other children, and

she had a hunchback, so she would never be able to stand up straight.

Because of all her problems, her parents were too embarrassed and ashamed to let anyone know she was their daughter. They didn't even want anyone to know she was alive. They didn't consider her to be part of the family and wouldn't even give her a name. A servant took the baby to the church to be baptized and named her Margaret, which means "Beautiful Pearl." This was an odd name to give her, since nobody thought she was very pretty at all.

Little Margaret was hidden in the castle, and only a few servants who took care of her knew she even existed. One day, when Margaret was about six, she was making her way around the castle as she liked to do—hobbling along with her bad limp and feeling her way holding on to the walls, since she couldn't see. Someone who was visiting her mother saw her and started talking to her, but a servant rushed in just as the stranger was about to ask Margaret who she was. Her parents' secret was still safe.

Her parents didn't want to take a chance that anything else like that would ever happen again, so her father had a special room added to a small church in the forest, where he made Margaret live all alone. The room didn't have a door. Little Margaret was put inside, and then the last wall was added to lock her in. It only had a window where people could pass food and other things to her. She could also listen to Mass through the window. She stayed in that tiny room for almost thirteen years. By listening to the

birds outside she could learn whether spring and summer were coming, which would make her room very hot, or if it was winter, which would explain why she was so cold.

The priest became her good friend and taught Margaret all about God, especially the Holy Family, and how to pray. She also learned she wasn't really alone. Jesus was right there in the tabernacle and she could talk to him whenever she wanted. So that was what she did. She spent all of her time talking and praying to Jesus.

A war broke out in her country, and everyone had to leave. Her father fought in the war. Her family took Margaret to a safer city and hid her in an underground cave. Margaret spent all of her time praying that the war would end quickly and that her father would be safe. She loved her parents very much, even though they never showed her any love. Although Margaret was used to being hidden away all alone, she missed the fresh air and the sounds of the animals and birds. She also really missed listening to Mass and talking to the priest. She had to endure this for over a year.

When the war was over, her parents knew they had to do something with Margaret. They had heard people talking about a church where miracles were happening, and they wanted God to cure Margaret. They knew how much Margaret loved God and thought surely God would answer her prayers. So they took Margaret to this shrine in the town of Castello and ordered her to stay there all day and pray that God would cure her of all that they thought