

What is a saint?

An excerpt from *The Experience of God*
by Father Dumitru Staniloae (1903-1993).

In the saint there is nothing trivial, nothing coarse, nothing base, nothing affected, nothing insincere. He is the culmination of sensitivity and transparency. The saint grasps the various conditions of the soul in all who come before him. Avoiding everything that would cause them sadness, he does not avoid what will help them see and overcome their weaknesses. He is able to read the least articulate needs of others and fulfill them promptly, even as he reads their faults, however skillfully hidden; and through the delicate power of his being, he exercises upon them a purifying action.

His is a spirit of sacrifice for the sake of all, with no concern for himself, a spirit giving warmth to others and assuring them they are not alone. There is no one more humble or simple, no one less artificial, less theatrical, or hypocritical, no one more natural in his behavior, no one more fully accepting of all that is truly human.

The saint has overcome every duality within himself, as Saint Maximos the Confessor says. He has overcome the struggle between soul and body, the divergence between good intentions and discordant deeds, between deceptive appearance and hidden thoughts, between what is claimed and what is really the case. He has become simple because he has surrendered himself entirely to God, and this is why he can surrender himself utterly in communication with others.

The saint lends courage. At times, through a humor marked by his gentleness, he shrinks the delusions created by fear or pride or the passions. He smiles but does not laugh sarcastically. He is serious but never frightened. He finds value in the humblest of persons, considering them to be great mysteries created by God and destined to eternal communion with Him. Through simplicity the saint makes himself almost unobserved, but he appears when there is need for consolation, for encouragement or help. He is the most unassuming of beings, and yet his appearance is so striking that it gives rise in others to the sense of discovering in him, and thus in themselves, what is truly human.

His presence is at once endearing and bracing, drawing—unintentionally—the most attention. He becomes for you the most intimate of all and the most

understanding. You never feel more at ease than when you are near him, but at the same time he forces you into a corner and makes you see your inadequacies and failings. He overwhelms you with the warmth of his goodness and makes you ashamed of how far you have fallen, of how far you have sunk in your artificiality, superficiality, and duplicity. For these appear in sharp relief in the comparison you are obliged to make, unwillingly, between yourself and him. He exercises no worldly power and gives no harsh commands, but you feel in him an unyielding firmness in his convictions and in the advice he gives. His opinion about what you should do, expressed in delicate words or by a discreet look, becomes for you a command, and to fulfill this command you find yourself capable of any effort or sacrifice.

Whoever approaches a saint discovers in him the summit of goodness and spiritual power, covered by a veil of humility. He is an illustration of the greatness and power of kenosis. From the saint there radiates an imperturbable silence and peace, and yet a participation in the pain of others that reaches the point of tears. He is rooted in the loving and suffering stability of the Incarnate One and blossoms forth in the power and goodness of God.