

# These Are My Heroes

## **Saint Edward of England, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Andrew Corsini, Saint Thomas Moore, Saint John Vianney.**

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Almighty and everlasting God, merciful Father, since You have today adopted as Your children these Your servants, grant, we implore You, that strengthened by the Holy Spirit and nourished by the Bread of Heaven, they may grow to full maturity in Christ. And may they always keep in mind their patron saints, so that by imitating them, they may attain to the eternal home of the Father.

Amen.

(Prayer from the Ritual for the administration of the Sacrament of Baptism.)

The saints of God – these are my heroes. They lived in different countries and different times; one was a king and one a lawyer, one a bishop and one a priest, and one founded a religious order; but something they all had in common was a great love for God.

Their names – Edward, Francis, Andrew, Thomas and John – are the names boys still use today. They are the names taken also at Confirmation, so that these saints are not only our heroes but our patrons. By reading about them, we can learn something from their lives to make our own lives more what God wants them to be.

### 1. A SAINT WHO WAS A KING.

Saint Edward (1003-1066).

SAINT EDWARD was born almost at the beginning of a new century, in the year 1003. But although he lived so long ago, he is still remembered as one of the best kings that England has ever had, and many of the wise laws he made have remained to the present day. He was called Edward the Peacemaker, and if ever the world needed a true peacemaker, it needs one today. What, then, can this saint and hero teach us?

When Edward was a little boy, England was in a state of war and unrest, and the Danish King, Canute, who ruled the country at that time, sent Edward and his brother Alfred, the rightful heirs to the throne, to Normandy, in France. Edward grew up in Normandy, leading a quiet and peaceful life. He was very fond of sport, particularly hunting and hawking, but at the same time, he liked to spend much of his time at prayer, alone with God. Once during his prayer he made a vow, a very solemn promise, to make a pilgrimage to Saint Peter's tomb in Rome if it should be God's Will to restore him to the English throne.

In the year 1042, the people of England sent to Edward to ask him to be their King. He agreed to this, although he knew it would be no easy task to rule a country that had been torn by many wars

and unjust laws. He said to one of his friends: "I would not accept the greatest of monarchies if it were to cost the blood of a single man."

Edward came back to England, and was crowned King on Easter Sunday, 1042. He was now forty, very handsome to look at, and very gentle in manner. Many people thought he would be too easygoing, and after a few years, another Danish king, Magnus, declared he would like to be King of England, and prepared to send Edward away again.

King Edward very firmly replied: "I sit on the throne as the descendant of the English monarchs, and I have been called to it by the free choice of the English people. Let Magnus come! I will raise no army against him, but he will never mount the throne of England until he has taken the life of Edward."

The people were delighted with such an answer, and England entered upon a period of peace and prosperity such as it had not known for a long time. King Edward was kind and charitable to his people, particularly the poor. He freed them from an unjust tax they had paid to the Danes, and no further taxes were imposed upon them. Someone has written this great praise about him: "Those in trouble were not afraid to ask his help. He always welcomed those who came to see him," It is not always easy to be able to welcome visitors, but Edward managed to do it.

The King now remembered his vow to go to Rome, but the people were so afraid that if he left the country the peace of the land might be broken again, that they begged him not to go. Edward pointed out that he must keep his vow, but he was moved by the fear of his people and wrote to the Pope to ask him what he should do.

The Pope understood how matters were in England. He freed King Edward from his vow and told him instead to give to the poor anything that he had collected for his journey, and also to build a church dedicated to Saint Peter to make up for the wonderful Saint Peter's in Rome that he was never to see.

There is one thing about the saints – they always obey.

Edward immediately set about putting aside money for the church he was to build, and finally it was completed. It is known today as Westminster Abbey, and it was here that, later on, the King was to be buried.

In the year 1065, Edward went to London to be present at the beautiful ceremony of the Dedication of the church he had built. But, as so often happens, he was not to witness the crowning glory to his work. On Christmas Eve, he became very ill, yet he practised his usual self-control by appearing as cheerful as ever and carrying on with his ordinary duties. He asked his wife, Queen Edith, to see to the proper decoration of the church for the Consecration ceremony, but despite all his efforts, Edward was too ill to be present himself on the great day. His work for God and his people was almost over, and on January 5th, 1066, he died. His feast is not kept on this day, but on October 13th, the day when Saint Thomas a'Becket removed Saint Edward's body from its first burial place to the shrine in the Abbey where it still rests.

There are several lessons that we can learn from the life of Saint Edward, but perhaps two stand out above the rest. The first is his great love for peace, a peace that he always had within his own soul, and that he also won for his country. No wars, no arguments, no conferences were used to obtain this peace; his every-day good example and peaceful living among his own people were the weapons of victory.

The second lesson is his faithful fulfilling of God's Will. King Edward knew that to be a saint he must do God's Will, and for him this Will of God consisted in trying to do at all times what he knew to be right for his country, his people and himself.

Saint Edward, the Peacemaker, who always tried to do God's Will, is a wonderful hero and patron for any boy.

## 2. A SAINT WHO FOUNDED A RELIGIOUS ORDER.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226).

THE streets of Assisi were bathed with sunlight. Down them rode Francis Bernardone, a smile on his lips, a song in his heart. Francis was young and happy, the leader of the young men of his city; and he had wonderful dreams of winning honour and glory in the wars that were always being fought between the Italian cities of his day.

Francis was the son of Peter and Pica Bernardone.

He was born in Assisi in the year 1182, and, as Peter Bernardone was a wealthy and well-respected citizen, his son was given a good education and took his place as unquestioned leader among those who would now be called teenagers.

Nothing disturbed the carefree and happy life of Francis until he was twenty. Then Assisi and the neighbouring territory of Perugia declared war, and Francis's heart leapt high. Here was his chance at last! Riding his noble horse and dressed in splendid clothing, Francis rode gaily to the war. But alas for his dreams! The Assisians were defeated and Francis was taken prisoner. But even prison could not dampen the joy that he always felt. His fellow-prisoners said: "You are mad to be merry in prison."

Francis just smiled at them. But at the same time, he became more thoughtful, and he could not help wondering about the life he had been leading. Perhaps God wanted more of him than an empty, carefree life. At length the prisoners were set free, and! Francis returned to Assisi. His friends noticed that although he was always cheerful he was much quieter than before, and Francis himself found no satisfaction in his old pleasures.

He prayed and waited. One day he made a visit to the Church of Saint Damian, outside Assisi, and as he knelt before the Crucifix, a voice seemed to come from the figure of Christ on the Cross.

"Go and repair My Church for Me."

Francis was very astonished, and in a trembling voice, replied:

"Gladly will I do it, dear Lord."

Our Lord meant Francis to help restore His Church to spiritual fervour, but the eager young man noticed that Saint Damian's was falling to ruins, and immediately set about rebuilding it. His father was angry with him and finally disowned him, and Francis cried out that in future he would have no father but God in Heaven.

For a while, Francis lived as a hermit, wearing a tunic of rough sacking tied round the waist with a cord. He wanted to be very poor for the sake of Our Lord, Who sometimes had not even a pillow on which to lay His head. But Francis was not by himself for long. Just as companions had gathered round him when he was rich, so they came to him now that he was poor, but this time for a different

reason. They wanted Francis to teach them to love God as he did, and to share his life of prayer and poverty. And although Francis did not realize it, this was the beginning of the great Franciscan Order, because as the years went on many other followers walked in the way Francis led. Priests, brothers, nuns, men and women in the world all claimed Francis of Assisi as their spiritual father.

So many happenings were crowded in the life of Francis that all could not possibly be told here, but some events stand out from the rest. Francis was very happy when Pope Honorius III gave his approval to the Franciscan Order, and he decided to celebrate Christmas in a very special way in thanksgiving. He went with some of his friars to a little country place called Greccio, where the Pope had given them permission to offer Midnight Mass in the open. An altar was erected, and beside it, Francis made a little Crib like the ones seen in churches today at Christmas time. But there was something different about this Crib, because it was the first one to be made to commemorate the birth of Our Lord at Bethlehem long ago.

The people came in great numbers to the Midnight Mass, and they gazed with delight at the Crib. Francis himself knelt at the side of the altar. He was not a priest, only a deacon, because he had such great reverence for the priesthood that he would not be ordained. He used to kneel down and kiss the ground where a priest had walked. When the priest came to the Elevation of the Mass, Francis looked up at the Sacred Host and saw for a minute the Holy Child from the Crib smiling at him and holding out His arms.

Another time, Francis, like Our Lord before him, went up a mountain to pray. This mountain was called Alverna, and Francis wanted to be quite alone so that he could be more united to God. Francis had always had a great love for the Passion of Our Lord, and perhaps as a reward for this devotion, he was now signed with the marks of the Stigmata – the wounds of Christ in his own human body.

When he had finished his prayer Francis noticed his hands and feet, and he felt a burning fire near his heart. In all these places were the glowing wounds that Our Lord had first received on Calvary, and which Francis was to carry till his death. No wonder he would often exclaim: “My Love is crucified.”

It was only two years after this that Francis died. He was not an old man, only forty-four years of age, but he was worn out with his work and love for God. When he knew that his last moments had come, he asked his brother Franciscans gathered round him to lift him out of bed and rest him on the bare ground, that he might die as he had lived, a poor man for the love of God. Saint Francis of Assisi was canonized by Pope Gregory IX only two years after his death, and his feast is kept on October 4th.

Like all the saints, Francis can teach us many lessons, but these two may be singled out: his great love and respect for priests, and his devotion to the sufferings and death of Christ.

Saint Francis of Assisi, teach us to reverence Our Lord in His priests, and to love Him in His Sacred Passion.

### 3. A SAINT WHO WAS A BISHOP.

Saint Andrew Corsini (1301-1375).

NICHOLAS and Gemma Corsini were very sad because they had no children. They prayed for many years for a child, and promised that if their prayers were heard, they would offer the little one in a special way to God through Our Blessed Lady.

Before their prayers were answered, Gemma had a strange dream. She thought she saw a savage wolf running to the church. She followed it, and after waiting for a while, she noticed that it slowly changed to a gentle lamb.

On the feast of Saint Andrew, 30th November, 1301, Nicholas and Gemma were able to thank God for having sent them a beautiful baby boy whom they named Andrew after the Apostle. Little Andrew belonged to a rich and noble family, and his parents sent him to the best schools where he always did well because he was very clever.

As he grew older, he noticed how the other rich people lived and he wanted to be like them; the world seemed a wonderful place to the young boy. He wanted his own horses and dogs, and more than anything else, he wanted a gun, because in those days, people were always fighting between themselves and Andrew thought it would be great if perhaps he could kill some of his enemies. He became more worldly than ever, he would not obey his mother and father, and laughed at them if they tried to correct him.

One day, when he had spoken very rudely to his mother, she answered him sternly: "I think, my son, that you must be the wolf I saw in my dream."

She had never spoken about the dream before, and Andrew was surprised at his mother's words. He asked her to explain them.

"Tell me, mother, what do you mean," he said.

"Listen carefully to what I am going to say," answered his mother, and she went on to tell him all about the wolf that had changed to a lamb, and how, because of her promise before he was born, Andrew really belonged more to Our Blessed Lady than to his own parents.

Poor Andrew! He was only fifteen and very upset to think of all the sorrow he had brought to his good mother and father, so he turned to Our Lady and begged her and the Divine Child to help him to behave as a lamb in future and not like a wild wolf.

Next morning Andrew went to the Carmelite Church, and in front of Our Lady's altar, he repeated his prayer. Then he rose from his knees, and went straight to Father Jerome, the Provincial of the Carmelites. He knelt down before him and asked very earnestly to be received as a postulant in the Order.

Father Jerome, of course, was much surprised to see the worldly Andrew Corsini before him, and still more so to hear his request. He spoke kindly to the boy, but would not give him an answer immediately.

When Andrew left him, Father Jerome went quickly to the boy's parents to tell them what had happened. Nicholas and Gemma were filled with joy, and told the priest that if their son could be a Carmelite, their dearest wish would come true. Very soon, though he was so young, Andrew was given the brown habit of the Carmelite Order, and from that time, he tried to live as a saint would live.

In the monastery, the Fathers remembered what a wild life their new novice had once led, and also how rich he had been, so they made up their minds to test him. He was given the hardest and humblest work about the place, and those who had once been his friends out in the world laughed at all he had to do now. But he took no notice of them, and tried his best – even though it was not always easy – to be faithful to his daily duties for the love of God and Our Lady.

At last, it was time for Andrew to be ordained a priest and to offer his first holy Mass. This is a wonderful day in the life of any priest, and it was particularly so for Andrew, because after Communion, Our Lady appeared to him, and said: “You are my servant, I have chosen you, and will be glorified in you.”

Father Andrew, who was so good at his school work when a boy, was now sent to the University of Paris, because when God makes a person clever it is good to use that cleverness for Him. Father Andrew wrote books, too, and he loved to explain the meaning of the writings of the Bible.

He was so wise and good that later on he was made Prior of the Carmelites in Florence, a beautiful Italian city, then Provincial of all Tuscany, and, finally, he was appointed Bishop of Fiesole. It was while he was Bishop that Andrew Corsini, who had once been a little boy longing to fight with a gun, became known as the peacemaker, because he tried so tirelessly to get people to live at peace with one another.

One Christmas when Bishop Andrew was offering Midnight Mass in the Cathedral at Fiesole, Our Lady appeared to him again. This time she came to tell him that he who had so faithfully served her on earth would soon be with her Divine Son forever in Heaven. The holy Carmelite was overjoyed to hear the news, and at once began to prepare for his death.

On January 6th, 1375, the Feast of the Epiphany, just as Our Lady had said, Saint Andrew Corsini died very peacefully with this prayer on his lips: “Now dismiss Your servant, O Lord, in peace.” After his death, many miracles were worked when people prayed to him, and Pope Urban VIII canonized him as a saint. His feast is kept on February 4th.

Boys with bad tempers can learn from Saint Andrew that with grace and perseverance it is possible to overcome their anger and impatience. They can also imitate him in his great devotion to Our Blessed Lady.

#### 4. A SAINT WHO WAS A LAWYER.

Saint Thomas More (1478-1535).

IN THE days when England was still completely Catholic, there lived in London a little boy who showed by his life that people can live in the world as ordinary lay-folk, yet become saints just as much as Popes and bishops, hermits and nuns.

Thomas More was born on February 7th 1478. He grew up with his three sisters and one brother in a good Catholic household, and when he was quite young, his father saw that this son of his was going to be very clever. Thomas knew he was clever, too, but he realized that his cleverness was a gift of God, and he studied very earnestly in order to make good use of the talents God had given him.

He knew, however, what a great saint had once said, that “prayer without study is presumption; study without prayer infidelity.” Therefore his duty to God always came first, and while he learned all he could about literature, science and music, all these studies were based on a foundation of deep

and true piety. Life at Oxford University in the days of Thomas More did not always help a student towards a faithful practice of his religion, yet young Thomas received Holy Communion frequently, and later when he was Chancellor of England, he was at Mass every morning, and quite often, he acted as altar boy.

After More left Oxford, he continued his studies at Lincoln's Inn, because his father wanted him to be a lawyer, and it was here that young men studied law. But Thomas was not quite certain of his future. He was certainly very keen about law, but, like many another young man, he wondered if God might be calling him to be a priest. To make quite sure, he went to live with the Carthusian Monks at their Monastery, called a Charterhouse, in London. He stayed there for four years, not as a monk, but just as a layman, working, praying and studying, and asking God all the time to make known His Will.

Finally Thomas was convinced that he should return to the world, and although he loved the life of a monk, he was quite determined that he was meant to serve God faithfully and loyally as a lawyer and father of a family. When he was twenty-six he was made a Member of Parliament, and the next year he married.

What a happy place was that More household. He loved his wife and children, and together they assisted at Holy Mass before the work of the day commenced. All the time Sir Thomas More could spare from the affairs of state he spent with his family, helping the children with their lessons, taking part in their games, sharing their childish joys and sorrows. People loved to visit the Mores because they were always so contented and happy together. At the close of the day, they would all gather round Sir Thomas as he led the family prayers.

The old King had died and the new King of England was Henry VIII. He was very fond of Thomas More and was not happy until he had the young lawyer near him at the Royal Court. King Henry raised Thomas to the highest office in the land by creating him Lord Chancellor of England. What a long way he had come from the little boy at Oxford. Here he was now at the peak of fame, loved and honoured by the King, respected by all who knew him, with wealth and a beautiful home and his loving wife and children.

But the Lord Chancellor was to be tested, and in the testing, he showed that he was still the same Thomas More who was determined to put loyalty to God and his conscience before any other loyalties. Henry VIII wanted to marry again while his wife, Queen Catherine, was still living. Of course, not even the Pope himself could give Henry permission to do this, and the King was so angry that he would no longer obey the Pope, but set himself up as head of the Church in England.

To make his position quite clear, Henry called on his subjects to take an oath declaring him to be head of the Church. He was particularly anxious for Sir Thomas More to take this oath, because the Lord Chancellor was so respected by everyone. Sir Thomas had gone to London with his son-in-law to hear Mass at Saint Paul's, and while he was there, he was summoned to take the new oath. He returned home to prepare for this ordeal. He went to Mass and received Holy Communion, as he always did before any serious event, then he said goodbye to his dear family, and took a last look at his happy home.

Sir Thomas refused to take the oath! The king and his court were astounded. They pointed out that others had taken it, people who were considered very good Catholics, even Bishops and priests; but the Lord Chancellor remained firm.

Others must look to their own consciences, he said, but he could not make a decision that would cause danger to his immortal soul, and he firmly believed that in spiritual matters the Pope alone was Head of the Church.

Thomas More was imprisoned in the Tower of London, and all the time he was there he prepared himself for the death he knew would come. In prison, too, just as at home, he was cheerful and contented and tried to make others happy. Finally, on July 6th, 1535, he was beheaded, a brave martyr who died because of his loyalty to the Pope and the Church.

What are some of the lessons we can learn from the life of Saint Thomas More? One could be the lesson of praying earnestly about our vocation in life, asking God to show us what He wants us to do just as Saint Thomas did. And we can also imitate Saint Thomas More in his devotion to the Pope. We should pray often for the Holy Father in these troubled times.

The feast of Saint Thomas More is kept on July 6th in many places but is now usually kept on June 22nd with his fellow Martyr, the holy bishop Saint John Fisher, who was executed on that day in 1535.

## 5. A SAINT WHO WAS A PARISH PRIEST.

Saint John Vianney (1786-1859).

MONSIEUR and MADAME VIANNEY lived in France in a small village named Dardilly. They were farmers, and already had three sons when in the year 1786 another little boy was born to them. They called the baby John Baptist.

John was only three when the French Revolution broke out. The churches were closed, the Angelus bell was silenced, priests were declared traitors, and if they were caught, they were cruelly put to death by the guillotine. This meant that while young John was growing up, Mass could only be offered secretly in a barn, in a quiet cave, or some other hidden place, and it was not until he was ten that he was able to receive his First Holy Communion. Religious peace was not restored to France until 1802.

Everyone thought John Vianney was a very dull young man. They called him a clumsy, uncouth ploughboy, even though they all agreed that he was very holy. When he was nineteen, he astonished his people by telling them that he wanted to be a priest, and he went to live with a good priest named Father Balley, who tried to educate John for the priesthood. It was hard work, and John himself realized it. He decided there were two things that he could do, and these he did. He prayed and did acts of mortification.

In the meantime, Napoleon was in power in France, and ordered all young men to be called up for the army. John had to go, but almost immediately, he became ill and was taken to hospital. When he recovered he tried to catch up with his regiment, but he was too tired and exhausted to reach it, and he found shelter with a kind man for whom he did odd jobs about the house. After a while, one of his young brothers took his place in the army, and John was free to enter a Seminary to continue his studies for the priesthood.

But here it was the same old story. John Vianney just could not learn Latin or theology. He failed in his examinations and was sent home. But good Father Balley came to the rescue again, and he kept persevering with teaching his slow pupil, until at long last John was ordained a priest. After three years, Father Vianney was sent to a little village called Ars to be Parish Priest there. Those in

authority thought that Ars did not need a clever, popular priest, and in this, they were really right; what Ars actually needed was a Parish Priest who was a saint. And Father John Vianney was that saint!

The people of Ars were kind and friendly, but were very careless in their spiritual duties. They liked their priest, but they weren't going to be bothered listening to his sermons (if he could preach at all!), or going to him to Confession (if he knew anything about forgiving sins!).

As before, Father Vianney prayed and did penance, and gradually, without anyone noticing it, Ars was a different place. The people went to Mass and the Sacraments, they flocked to Father Vianney's confessional; they would rather confess to him than to any other priest in France; they listened eagerly to his sermons, because it is simple words and old truths over and over again that help most. Soon men, women and children, the rich and the poor, came crowding into Ars to go to Confession to its holy priest, Father John Vianney, who had failed in his examinations, whom everyone had thought dull and lazy. Ars could not hold all the people, and still they came. Father Vianney, they had heard, was a saint, and he could read people's souls; they wanted his blessing, they wanted to speak to him.

And how did Father Vianney become such a success? He may not have been clever, but he knew quite well what another priest was to say of him years later, "that to be a priest means to sacrifice your whole life for others for Christ's sake."

And so he gave his whole day to his people. He got up at one o'clock in the morning, and prayed for a long time, because he knew that work without prayer would not have lasting results. He offered Mass, he heard Confessions, he visited the poor, the sick, the sinners; he heard more Confessions, he preached to the people, he prayed again, and he went to bed at midnight! (He had snatched an hour or two of sleep during the day between his busy duties.) But when did he eat? During the day, he ate a few boiled potatoes, and sometimes an egg, and he had this poor meal standing up. Yet he lived to be seventy-three, keeping up this sort of life all day long, every day, all through the years.

But at last, it was time for Father Vianney to earn the reward of his priestly life. He knew that he was soon to die, and agreed to leave his hard bed of two wooden boards for a soft mattress, and to let his parishioners look after him, as they had always longed to do.

"It is my poor end," he whispered with tears in his eyes. "I do not know whether I have carried out my duties well or not."

He received the Last Sacraments, and in the very early hours of an August morning in the year 1859, he died peacefully, just as the young priest at his bedside was reading this beautiful prayer: "May the holy angels of God come to meet him, and lead him into the heavenly City."

One lesson that stands out straight away in the life of Saint John Vianney is that of perseverance. See how he kept on struggling, despite so many obstacles, to achieve his great ambition to become a priest. We should pray to Saint John Vianney for our own parish priests and curates that he will help them in the same work that he once had to do.

The feast of Saint John Vianney is celebrated on August 9th. [Since Blessed Pope Paul VI's time, it is on August 4th.]

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