

Vintage Saints and Sinners

Karen Wright Marsh | Reviewed by Suzanne Lewis

Vintage Saints and Sinners is a thought provoking introduction to the lives of several saints, including some who have been often ignored in our modern day. Karen Wright Marsh compiled this book after years of discussions with college students at the ministry she and her husband co-founded and run. Marsh has no doubt conducted deep research into the saints' lives resulting in an accessible narrative with a bird's eye perspective. Though these Christian saints lived very different lives and are separated from us by time, space, technology, and culture, Marsh puts them in conversation with the challenges we face today.

Perhaps *Vintage Saints and Sinners* is accessible because Marsh successfully humanizes these saints and displays her internal struggle with learning from such heroes of the faith, thus inviting the reader to do so as well. Some saints' stories are difficult to read, like Mary Paik Lee's experience as a Korean immigrant severely mistreated in her new home by Americans, or Therese who harassed the Pope himself in an effort to become a nun early but died at twenty-four, or AW Tozer who was a beloved and frequent preacher but also neglected his family in his efforts to serve God. It is Marsh's commentary that assists the reader in moving beyond biography to enter into these saints' worlds and see them as mentors.

Several of the women Marsh surveys lived in a time when the only ministry role available to them was to become a nun and live a cloistered life. It's painful to read about women who strove fervently to serve God with their whole lives but, because of the time in which they were born, had so few options. I can only wonder what else these women could have accomplished if they had simply been allowed *out*. The contrast between a woman who can only become a nun and a man who can try multiple professions and then start a monastery is startling, even for someone who regularly thinks about sexism and gendered roles. At the same time, I wonder how many times I have restrained myself from ministry opportunities after worrying about the optics or being too exhausted to push against the grain. If these women saints had modern day opportunities, they would do what they did then—go all in to follow Christ. But more importantly, Marsh shows how whatever life's circumstances, these saints, women and men, acted upon their firm belief that God *would* use them, and they obeyed no matter what.

My strongest critique of this book is the order and structure. This book is divided into two parts based on the first and second halves of Jeremiah 6:16: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." Marsh's commentary at the beginning and end of each chapter is what made the book work, but it was unclear to me why the saints were ordered the way they were. A chronological order may have been more difficult to draw the reader into since the cloistered life is foreign to many of us today, especially in the Protestant tradition. However, the book ended up feeling like a smorgasbord overview of the saints.

Nonetheless, I recommend this book. It not only humanizes the saints in its pages, but it also reminds us that in each day and age, Christians have faced unique challenges, but God will lead us through just as God has led nuns and monks, citizens of Nazi Germany, writers, activists, and pastors. Marsh has offered us insight into more of the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us.

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