

Series Number Six- 1988
Saints: San Cristóbal de las Casas

Eight Photographs
Michael Nye

Series Number Six- 1988
Saints: San Cristóbal de las Casas

Eight Photographs
Michael Nye

Saints: San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico

'Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proven innocent, but the tests that have to be applied to them are not, of course, the same in all cases.' So begins George Orwell's *Reflections on Gandhi*. (1949).

Saint Agnes was a member of the Roman elite and born in 291 AD. She was a beautiful young woman and had many suitors but she refused their advances because of her devotion to purity. As a result she was condemned to be dragged naked through the streets to a brothel. She prayed and her hair grew and covered her body. One man tried to rape her but was immediately struck blind. There was a trial and she was sentenced to death but the wood would not burn whereupon an officer in charge drew his sword and beheaded her. Agnes is the patron *Saint* of chastity, gardeners, girls, rape survivors and virgins.



Saint Agnes with Lamb

One characteristic of *Saints* is that you admire them for some honorable deed performed or imagined. As a child I wondered about *Saints*. What is the difference between *Saints* and guardian angels? Are there any troubling aspects of *Saints*? Can a *Saint* be immoral? Why do adults whisper when talking about *Saints*? Can someone be a *Saint* and not believe in God?

The first time I got into any serious trouble was in the second grade. My teacher walked me to the principal's office for daydreaming. She told me, "Wait here Mikey, I'm going to get the principal." It was a small room and I was alone. Around the edges of the room were paintings of *Saints* and a life-size crucifixion of Jesus. There were nails and thorns and blood. It seemed scary. As I waited, I spotted a large red button that had the word "PUSH". So I pointed my finger and obeyed the instruction. The school's fire alarm bells began screaming. Children from grades one through seven went running outdoors, each eye looking for smoke. Four nuns came tumbling into the office. At that time

they seemed to be about 6'6" tall – broad shoulders and sad faces. The principal nun had a pulsating vein in the center of her forehead. She asked me, “Mikey, did you press that button?” I spoke with a slow stutter, “NO, I – I - I did not.” I was un-*Saintly* and my life went on from there.

On our second trip to San Cristóbal de las Casas we were invited to stay at our friends home (Robert and Mimi Laughlin) located in the center of the city. Originally the home had been a monastic monastery with reddish thick adobe walls enclosing the property and gardens. It had also been the home of poet W. S. Merwin during his travels in Southern Mexico.

Robert was an anthropologist and had compiled a book recording dreams from indigenous Zinacantan communities. In the dark morning away from our dreams, my wife and I would build a fire and walk along the cold remembered stones to the kitchen to boil water. We were in two worlds. Inside the walls were luscious wet gardens, parrots, life bursting with stillness and the untroubled plants growing - old roses and herbs. Outside was a city in motion, sounds of ringing bells, voices rising, crowds of people rushing, bicycles, young men



Saints # 7

carrying fruits and flowers to the markets. I was surprised what walls could do.

Passion also has a voice of its own. One day just after noon I followed a father and his two young sons into one of the smaller churches on the edge of town. The two boys were young – maybe seven and three. The church was empty except for us. They walked to the smaller side altar and begin playing music and singing. The father played the violin, the older son a guitar and the little boy a bass guitar with only one string. It was the saddest most beautiful song I had ever heard or have ever heard since. The experience seemed dreamlike. Some distant truth existed in that song. Their faces were pointed to the many *Saints* and the Virgin Mary above them. They were the *Saints*. They gave their voices and songs freely.

I saw *Saints* everywhere that day – cloth sellers and waitresses and young women stacking bananas. The street sweeper seemed *Saintly*. His face paused, “Mucho gusto!” Maybe *Saints* become *Saints* not for their religious belief but for their devotion to daily presence and to the lives of others. Sainthood needs no canonization.



Saints # 8

I begin to work on a series of photographic diptychs (two photographs placed side by side). In each pair of photographs, the first was a historical face of a saint statue found in local cathedrals. The second images were individuals I met on the street representing a notion of imagined *Saintly* human passion and presence. Human passion mixed with kindness is mysterious. Where does it come from, how does it disappear?



Saints # 1

In small stores along Calle Real de Guadalupe shopkeepers were selling *Saint* prayer candles. Each *Saintly* person on each candle promised some specific protection. *Saint* Ignacio offers courage and will protect you from burglary and evil spirits. *Saint* Justo Juez hands out justice if you have been falsely accused of a crime. *Saint* Aparicio's candle will help you find lost articles. *Saint* Alex will rid your life of enemies. *Saint* Martin of Tours will improve the cash flow in your business.



Saints # 2

The statues and paintings of *Saints* were positioned high in local churches and cathedrals. I went to priests and bishops asking if I could bring my camera in to photograph the faces of these *Saints* more closely. Surprisingly, most granted permission. I borrowed and climbed to the top of a 20-foot ladder, one hand clutching camera and film – one foot carefully balanced in these humble dark spaces. I found myself eye to eye with the painted and carved wooden and marble *Saints*. They had kindly sorrowful faces offering promise. Perception lives on the edges of perspective.

It was comforting being high up in the churches. All around the cathedral were flickering candles - small lights flowing in from opening and closing doors - stained colored windows – the careful sounds of feet tiptoeing – the slow presence of whispering prayers and words rising and with the smell of incents and imbedded time. There, high above it all, lived the softest light in Chiapas.

* * * * *



Saints # 3



Saints # 4



Saints # 5



Saints # 6

* * * * *

Saints: San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico

'Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proven innocent, but the tests that have to be applied to them are not, of course, the same in all cases.' So begins George Orwell's *Reflections on Gandhi*. (1949).

Saint Agnes was a member of the Roman elite and born in 291 AD. She was a beautiful young woman and had many suitors but she refused their advances because of her devotion to purity. As a result she was condemned to be dragged naked through the streets to a brothel. She prayed and her hair grew and covered her body. One man tried to rape her but was immediately struck blind. There was a trial and she was sentenced to death but the wood would not burn whereupon an officer in charge drew his sword and beheaded her. Agnes is the patron *Saint* of chastity, gardeners, girls, rape survivors and virgins.



Saint Agnes with Lamb

One characteristic of *Saints* is that you admire them for some honorable deed performed or imagined. As a child I wondered about *Saints*. What is the difference between *Saints* and guardian angels? Are there any troubling aspects of *Saints*? Can a *Saint* be immoral? Why do adults whisper when talking about *Saints*? Can someone be a *Saint* and not believe in God?

The first time I got into any serious trouble was in the second grade. My teacher walked me to the principal's office for daydreaming. She told me, "Wait here Mikey, I'm going to get the principal." It was a small room and I was alone. Around the edges of the room were paintings of *Saints* and a life-size crucifixion of Jesus. There were nails and thorns and blood. It seemed scary. As I waited, I spotted a large red button that had the word "PUSH". So I pointed my finger and obeyed the instruction. The school's fire alarm bells began screaming. Children from grades one through seven went running outdoors, each eye looking for smoke. Four nuns came tumbling into the office. At that time

they seemed to be about 6'6" tall – broad shoulders and sad faces. The principal nun had a pulsating vein in the center of her forehead. She asked me, “Mikey, did you press that button?” I spoke with a slow stutter, “NO, I – I - I did not.” I was un-*Saintly* and my life went on from there.

On our second trip to San Cristóbal de las Casas we were invited to stay at our friends home (Robert and Mimi Laughlin) located in the center of the city. Originally the home had been a monastic monastery with reddish thick adobe walls enclosing the property and gardens. It had also been the home of poet W. S. Merwin during his travels in Southern Mexico.

Robert was an anthropologist and had compiled a book recording dreams from indigenous Zinacantan communities. In the dark morning away from our dreams, my wife and I would build a fire and walk along the cold remembered stones to the kitchen to boil water. We were in two worlds. Inside the walls were luscious wet gardens, parrots, life bursting with stillness and the untroubled plants growing - old roses and herbs. Outside was a city in motion, sounds of ringing bells, voices rising, crowds of people rushing, bicycles, young men



Saints # 7

carrying fruits and flowers to the markets. I was surprised what walls could do.

Passion also has a voice of its own. One day just after noon I followed a father and his two young sons into one of the smaller churches on the edge of town. The two boys were young – maybe seven and three. The church was empty except for us. They walked to the smaller side altar and begin playing music and singing. The father played the violin, the older son a guitar and the little boy a bass guitar with only one string. It was the saddest most beautiful song I had ever heard or have ever heard since. The experience seemed dreamlike. Some distant truth existed in that song. Their faces were pointed to the many *Saints* and the Virgin Mary above them. They were the *Saints*. They gave their voices and songs freely.

I saw *Saints* everywhere that day – cloth sellers and waitresses and young women stacking bananas. The street sweeper seemed *Saintly*. His face paused, “Mucho gusto!” Maybe *Saints* become *Saints* not for their religious belief but for their devotion to daily presence and to the lives of others. Sainthood needs no canonization.



Saints # 8

I begin to work on a series of photographic diptychs (two photographs placed side by side). In each pair of photographs, the first was a historical face of a saint statue found in local cathedrals. The second images were individuals I met on the street representing a notion of imagined *Saintly* human passion and presence. Human passion mixed with kindness is mysterious. Where does it come from, how does it disappear?



Saints # 1

In small stores along Calle Real de Guadalupe shopkeepers were selling *Saint* prayer candles. Each *Saintly* person on each candle promised some specific protection. *Saint* Ignacio offers courage and will protect you from burglary and evil spirits. *Saint* Justo Juez hands out justice if you have been falsely accused of a crime. *Saint* Aparicio's candle will help you find lost articles. *Saint* Alex will rid your life of enemies. *Saint* Martin of Tours will improve the cash flow in your business.



Saints # 2

The statues and paintings of *Saints* were positioned high in local churches and cathedrals. I went to priests and bishops asking if I could bring my camera in to photograph the faces of these *Saints* more closely. Surprisingly, most granted permission. I borrowed and climbed to the top of a 20-foot ladder, one hand clutching camera and film – one foot carefully balanced in these humble dark spaces. I found myself eye to eye with the painted and carved wooden and marble *Saints*. They had kindly sorrowful faces offering promise. Perception lives on the edges of perspective.

It was comforting being high up in the churches. All around the cathedral were flickering candles - small lights flowing in from opening and closing doors - stained colored windows – the careful sounds of feet tiptoeing – the slow presence of whispering prayers and words rising and with the smell of incents and imbedded time. There, high above it all, lived the softest light in Chiapas.

* * * * *



Saints # 3



Saints # 4



Saints # 5



Saints # 6

* * * * *