

Series Number Seven
Saints

Photographs 1988 - Essay 2025

Eight Photographs
Michael Nye

Saints:

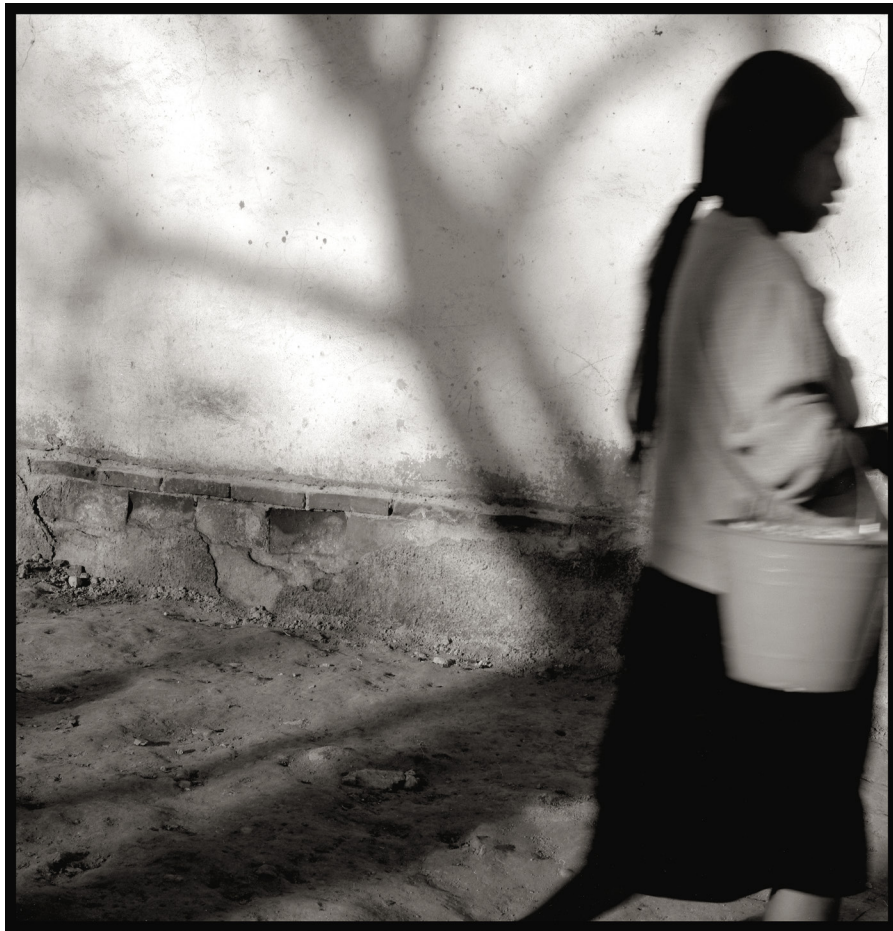
‘Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proven innocent, but the tests that have to be applied to them are not, of course, the same in all cases.’ So begins George Orwell’s Reflections on Gandhi (1949)

Saint Agnes was a member of the Roman elite born in 291 AD. As a young woman, she had many suitors, but 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

One characteristic of saints is that you admire them for some honorable deed performed or imagined. As a child I wondered about saints. Why so serious and sorrowful? 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 in class. 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. 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 searching for smoke. Four nuns came tumbling into the office. The principal nun was smoking a cigarette and 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, no, no I – I - I did not.”* I was un-saintly and my life went on from there.



Saints # One

On our second trip to San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico we were invited to stay in the home of 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. Robert was an anthropologist and had compiled a book recording dreams from indigenous Zinacantan communities. In the dark early morning away from our dreams, my wife Naomi and I would build a fire and walk along the remembered stones to the kitchen to boil water. We were in two worlds. Inside the walls were luscious rose and herb gardens, parrots whistling, life bursting with stillness and the untroubled plants growing. Outside, was a city in motion, sounds of ringing bells, voices rising, crowds of people rushing, bicycles, young men carrying fruits and firewood to the markets. I was surprised what walls could do.

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 musical notes floated in mid-air. Some distant place or truth existed in that song. Their faces were pointed to the many marble Saints above them. They were the Saints. They gave their voices and song freely.

I saw Saints everywhere that day – shopkeepers - waitresses - men repairing a street - a donkey carrying food, a teacher with a basket of books - a mother and her child waiting for a bus - an affable banker and a quiet street sweeper all seemed Saintly. Faces



raised, “Mucho gusto!” ¿Cómo estás? In this series of photographs, Sainthood is not conditioned on membership or sincerity. Sainthood is not contingent on sinlessness, faith or extraordinary powers. Sainthood has more to do with a devotion to presence, a stretch of a story or the endurance of a long walk. Here, in these crowded streets in San Cristobal de las Casas, sainthood requires no canonization.

In small stores along Calle Real de Guadalupe, shopkeepers were selling Saint prayer candles. Each Saintly person pictured on each candle promised some specific protection. Saint Ignacio offers courage and protection from burglary and evil spirits. Saint Justo Juez hands out justice if you have been falsely accused of a crime. Saint Aparicio will help you find lost articles. Saint Alex will rid you of enemies. Saint Martin of Tours will improve the cash flow in your business. Saint Jude was the most expensive candle, he is dedicated to lost explanations and impossible causes.

The marble religious statues of Saints were positioned high in local churches and cathedrals. I went to a local bishop and asked if I could bring my camera and a ladder to photograph the faces of the statute saints more closely. The Bishop granted me permission. I borrowed a 20-foot ladder and climbed to the top, one hand clutching camera and film, one foot carefully balanced.

I found myself eye to eye with sad marble faces offering something unworldly. All around the cathedral were flickering candles - dim lights flowing in from opening and closing doors - stained colored windows – the careful sounds of feet tiptoeing – the slow presence of whispering prayers rising with the smell of incense and imbedded time. One family was on their knees murmuring. Who was listening to them? There, high on a ladder, above it all, lived the softest light in Chiapas.

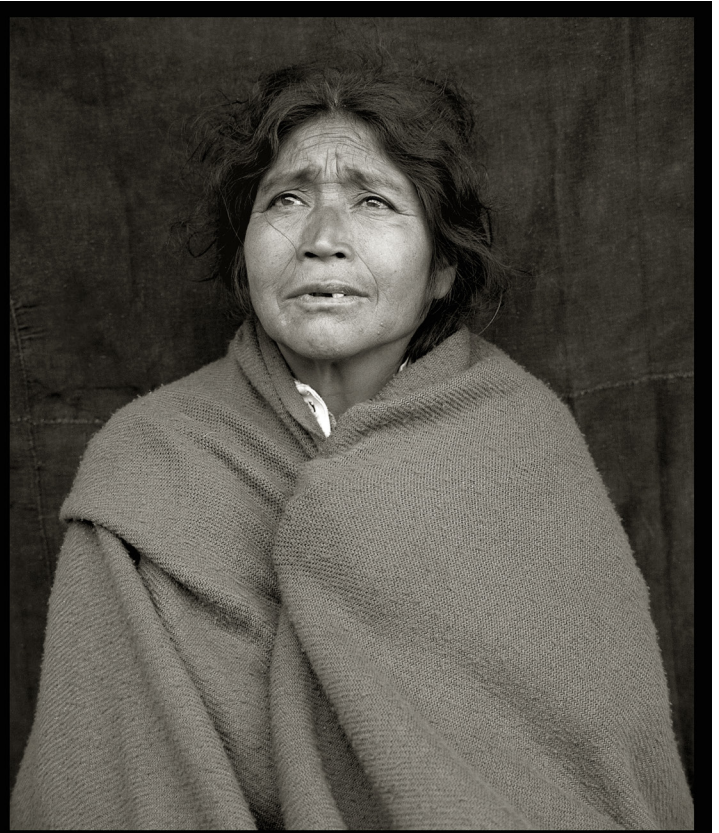
Essay - May 2025



Saints # Three



Saints # Four



Saints # Five



Saints # Six



Saints # Seven



Saints # Eight

* * * * *