

COMPLAINTS of the *Saints*

STUMBLING UPON HOLINESS
WITH A RABBY MYSTIC

SR. MARY LEA HILL, FSP



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STUMBLING ON HOLINESS
WITH A CRABBY MYSTIC

BY MARY LEA HILL, FSP


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*To our founder, Blessed James Alberione, who said,
“It makes me rejoice when one of you brings me a book
that you have written. I offer it immediately to God.”*

and

*In loving memory of
Father James (Jim) T. Edwards, Jr.
1950–2020*

Saint Louis, Missouri.

The best of priests and a person who never needed this book.

Contents

A Monk's Tale	<i>xiii</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>xv</i>
Introduction	<i>1</i>

PART I

Complaints and Their Causes

1. Lamentability	<i>7</i>
2. Complaints Are Common	<i>9</i>
3. Why We Complain	<i>11</i>
4. Both/And	<i>13</i>
5. Normal People	<i>15</i>
6. Oops!	<i>17</i>
7. Learned Behavior	<i>19</i>
8. Ease, If You Please	<i>21</i>
9. My Genes Are Too Tight	<i>23</i>
10. Compliance	<i>25</i>
11. Porcupines	<i>27</i>

PART II

Complaints of Some Saints

12. Definition of a Saint (Saints and Aints)	31
13. Why Pray to the Saints?	33
14. Guess Who Complained	35
15. Jesus, Too!	39
16. Standards	41
17. Holy Equality	43
18. Contemporary Complaints	45
19. First Love	47
20. Three Ts	49
21. La Madre Says	51
22. Lisieux	53
23. Saint Thérèse and the Rosary Banger	55
24. Poorest of the Poor	59
25. Patron Saint of Complainers	61
26. How Paul Did It	65
27. Leper Priest	67
28. Brother Leo's Complaint	71
29. Divine Mercy	73
30. Domestic Holiness	75
31. Sainly Doppelganger	77
32. There's Nothing to Do!	79
33. What a Disappointment	81

34. Why Am I So Unlovable?	83
35. Blown Call	85
36. Holy Mountain	87
37. Moving Men	91
38. Thanks for Asking, Saint Gertrude	93
39. Dear Diary	97
40. “Since Thou Dost Love”	99

PART III

Complaints from the Holy Book

41. Red Flags	105
42. Too Heavy for Me	107
43. Complaining Prophet	109
44. Where Were You?	111
45. Complaint Inside a Complaint	113
46. Two Men Walk Into	115
47. Front for Faults	117
48. Trashing	119
49. More Trashing	121
50. In the Beginning	123

PART IV

Learning from the Saints How to Handle Complaining

51. Look the Part	127
52. My Sainted “Other”	129

53. Statuesque	131
54. Truth Be Told	133
55. Wishing Well	135
56. Terrible News	137
57. Imperfect Perfection	139
58. Perfect Imperfection	141
59. Facial Recognition	143
60. Life Vision	145
61. Two Who Could Have	147
62. Alberione's Advice	149
63. Little Conversations	151
64. Super-Duper Hero	153
65. Saints and Complaints	155
66. Daily Challenge	157
Characteristics of Charity	159
I. Charity is patient	160
II. Charity is kind	161
III. Charity does not envy	162
IV. Love is not pretentious	163
V. Love is not puffed up	164
VI. Love is not ambitious	165
VII. Love is not self-seeking	165
VIII. Charity is not provoked	166
IX. Charity thinks no evil	168
X. Charity doesn't rejoice over wickedness (injustice)	169

XI. Charity rejoices with the truth	170
XII. Charity bears all things	171
XIII. Charity believes all	172
XIV. Charity hopes all things	173
XV. Charity endures all things	174
XVI. Reading from First Corinthians	175
Postscript.	179
Notes	181

A Monk's Tale

The young monk had a vow of silence. Once a year his superior asked how things were going.

The first year he replied: "Food's bad."

The next year he said: "Bed's hard."

The third year he commented: "Chapel's cold." Then he added simply: "I quit."

"And it's a good thing," his superior said, "because for three years all you've done is complain."

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Introduction

You may be tempted to ask why another book on the saints? At which point I would be tempted to retort: is that a complaint?

Holiness is an activity open to everyone. Of course, it is no secret that saints have problems *and* saints can *be* problems as well.

We have all read books about saints who appear to be made of plaster of paris. Not that these saints were mere statues, but they never moved out of their holiest poses. We never saw their humanness, what made them so like us. We saw their heroism, their holiness, but not their humanity. Biographers were simply overzealous by attempting to make the saint's halo shine brightly as an exemplar of all things virtuous.

For many readers, myself included, this type of writing is off-putting. It's not that someone couldn't have lived such a stellar life, but since that isn't our experience, the accounts fail to teach us anything useful. Certainly, we admire the saints, but we don't have much incentive to imitate someone presented as confirmed in virtue because we aren't starting from a level playing field. While they progressed straight through every obstacle, we keep spinning our wheels on the road to

perfection. Therefore, I've decided to write about saints from the perspective of their faults in order to observe their steps toward victory.

This book will not be a defense of our personal defects, but rather a celebration of our successes. We want holiness, but we also want our own way. We really are the "children" of God with so many whims and wants that get in the way of God's plans for us.

With this in mind, let's focus on the tendency to complain. Why do we care if we have complainers around? They are just annoying for the most part. If we ourselves are the complainers, however, it should be concerning. First and foremost because Jesus tells us we are to be holy, in fact, as perfect as the heavenly Father (see Mt 5:48). And complaining just doesn't seem all that perfect. The mandate to be perfect may appear a bit steep, but it's simply this: to try to love God with our whole mind, will, and heart, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

I don't know about you, but it bothers me that I complain. It tells me that my personal program of life is not in sync with Jesus' program. So, the next best step is to try making some sense of the whole wide world of complaints. What better way to go about this than to take a look at how certain saints dealt with complaints? Which saints complained? Isn't it a bit of a scandal to even admit that they might have complained? And, what would saints have complained about?



True confession: I chose the topic of complaints because it's the area I'm most familiar with. It is an expression of my

own character, which explains my tagline: The Crabby Mystic. I am a crabby person called to holiness. I can also attest to the fact that when we are on a personal quest for holiness (as we all should be), enlightenment often comes from something we stumble upon rather than from years of prayer and reflection. So I invite you to join me to see what this all meant to the saints and what it can mean for you and me.

PART I

Complaints
and Their Causes

Lamentability

Words can be a problem. For example, how often do I have to check myself on whether to use *compliment* or *complement* in a sentence? The dilemma is the same for *anecdote* and *antidote* or *laid* and *lied*. I remember being called up to my teacher's desk in second or third grade because I had chosen incorrectly between *come* and *came*. I tried arguing that it was difficult to tell the difference between them, but the teacher suggested that I study better.

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”²

And when it comes to arguments and complaints, like Humpty Dumpty, we do intend that our word usage is the *master meaning*.

The choice of words, their meaning, their usage, and the ensuing arguments are also leading contributors to the fine art of complaint. There had to have been an original kerfuffle, of course, but how words are used and how they are understood can quickly lead us down the path of confrontation.

Not all complaints are created equal. They come in all shapes and sizes and exist for all sorts of reasons. Basically, a complaint expresses dissatisfaction with something that is wrong, unfair, or unacceptable. Dictionaries tell us that the root of complaint is from the Latin *complangere*, meaning “lament.” We can see this in the word *plaintive*, as in a *plaintive cry*, or from a *plaintiff’s reaction*. From this we realize that many complaints are just laments that things are not better.

One of the most common causes of complaint is annoyance. We all get annoyed, even infants. Think of your reaction when suddenly a baby starts wailing while you are delayed in a grocery store line or a medical office waiting room. “Thank you,” you mumble, “I was just about to say the same thing.”

Complaints can also stem from misunderstanding, embarrassment, pettiness, pride, aggravation, and, sometimes, simply mean-spiritedness.



A word similar to *complaint* is *compliant*. We don’t like to be simply *compliant*, but how do you think *complaint* can become a more positive dynamic in certain circumstances?

Complaints Are Common

Why get annoyed to the point of complaining? It's because something isn't right, and I cannot rectify it outright. For any variety of reasons, a direct confrontation isn't possible. I'm not the right person; it's not the right time or place; perhaps I'm not even sure of the motivations for this "wrong" that needs "righting." In any case, a complaint seems to be the best weapon of righteousness available to me.

These samples from convent life can illustrate what I mean.

A complaint could be a snide, indirect response to someone's overzealous comment about my food consumption.

Her: "Why are you always eating donuts? You shouldn't eat them, especially those fancy ones!"

Me: "Not to worry! I know a plain donut is better for you than a frosted one—so I licked all of the chocolate off before I ate it."

Translation: Stop harassing me about my health!

Some complaints are just meant to be entertaining (hopefully) as this one from Sister Carmela, a notoriously creative person and plain-spoken individual: "The Church should

change the prayer for the dead. How can they enjoy eternal rest if a perpetual light is on?"

Here's another example of a common complaint: "*Why don't you affirm me more?*"

Once a sister complained like this to Mother Thecla Merlo, the co-foundress of the Daughters of Saint Paul, my religious congregation. "Mother," she said, "Why do you only see and correct the wrong things that I do? You never tell me how well I am doing." Mother Thecla replied: "God sees and rewards what we do well, but my job is to help you become better."

How often do we complain *because* others are doing their duty?

Not all complaints are negative, and they can appear in various forms, such as statements, questions, or recommendations. We've all heard this one: "*If you're cold, put on a sweater.*" There's also this one: "*Wasn't it cold in the house this morning!*" Or this one: "*What's the use of a furnace if we never turn it on?*"

Saint John Henry Cardinal Newman explains:

It is the characteristic of our minds to be ever engaged in passing judgment on the things which come before us. No sooner do we apprehend than we judge: we allow nothing to stand by itself: we compare, contrast, abstract, generalize, connect, adjust, classify: and we view all our knowledge in the associations with which these processes have invested it.³



Newman is referencing our natural thought processes. Do we also have a natural responsibility to channel our thoughts so that the outcome will be realistic and genuine?

Why We Complain

A complaint is often a valid observation that we might not have the virtue to convey appropriately. I like to think of complaints as social commentary. This way they have more class and become a more dignified way of saying what needs to be said (to no one in particular, but everyone in general). In the matter of complaints, we hold to very biased views. We side with the opinion closest to our own, so they are often “our own” by default.

What do we complain about? Here are a few scenarios:

- Someone offended me;
- I am living in fear;
- I can't get ahead;
- People are mean;
- I am weak, addicted, impatient, hopeless, etc.;
- My spouse ignores me;
- Authority targets me;
- I'm losing my edge: I'm forgetful, tired, disinterested, etc.;

- I've been cheated, robbed, offended;
- Life isn't fair;
- I can't pray; I can hardly believe.

Am I at the point that I complain *because* I complain? Why was I born with this disposition? Why not sweet, accepting, excusing? Why do I burn to comment and complain? What does all this mean?

- Does complaining become a habitual recourse?
- Is it my feel-good response?
- Is it so automatic that I can complain without engaging reason or even will?
- What can I do to be more authentic about my perception of wrong?

The real crux of complaining is not what is said, not the effect, but the intent in saying it. Am I just blustering, just making a comment for comment's sake, making a joke, or is my intention something negative, insidious, hurtful, or downright evil? Sometimes we later assign a more positive intention after seeing the pain or confusion our complaint caused, but wouldn't it be better if we kept an eye on our intentions so as to be better prepared when the urge to complain arises?



A helpful prayer:

Let my words and my thoughts be pleasing to you, LORD, because you are my mighty rock and my protector. (Ps 19:15 CEV)

Write a short prayer from your own heart.