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Award-winning Author Colleen Carroll Campbell Shows How the Saints Can Help Us Recover from Perfectionism in Her New Book, *The Heart of Perfection*
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A lifelong overachiever juggling a demanding career with marriage, parenting, and homeschooling four young children, Colleen Carroll Campbell knows something about the trap of perfectionism. Her new book, *The Heart of Perfection: How the Saints Taught Me to Trade My Dream of Perfect for God's* (Howard Books, \$25.00 hardcover, May 21, 2019), tells how she broke the toxic cycle of pride, anxiety, shame, and despair with the help of some surprising spiritual guides: seven saints who were recovering perfectionists themselves, and one heretic who offers a cautionary tale of extremist perfectionism.

Campbell, who drafted her first résumé in sixth grade and spell-checked her high-school boyfriend's love letters, thought of herself as an ambitious but well-rounded person who worked hard and played hard. After she became a mother, she saw how insidiously perfectionism had infected her spiritual life, and how harmful it could be to her family. She weaves together stories of her own struggles against comparison and impossible expectations with those of the holy men and women whose often hidden battles against perfectionist striving held the key to their heroic virtue and joy:

- **Francis of Assisi**, whose transition from Golden Boy to penniless preacher came only after years of anguish over the opinions of others, teaches us how to embrace our identity as “strangers and pilgrims” even when social conformity's perks are more tangible.
- Harried single mother **Jane de Chantal** was caught in perfectionism's “negative feedback loop,” as Campbell calls it, until fellow ex-perfectionist **Francis de Sales** taught her that the best way to learn patience with her children and in-laws was to practice it on herself.
- **Ignatius of Loyola** developed nearly two dozen practical, biblically based discernment rules that are still the gold standard for Christian decision-making today and are a lifeline for perfectionists prone to the same crippling discouragement and distraction that he was.
- The 1,500-year-old Rule of **Benedict of Nursia** offers a countercultural vision of work-life balance that helped the Benedictine monks save civilization during the Dark Ages – and can help us save our sanity and family life in today's Information Age.
- **Thérèse of Lisieux**'s “little way of confidence and love” is about learning to love with God's heart and to show mercy to those we often find hardest to forgive: ourselves.
- Driven to the brink of breakdown by hypercritical parents and a worldview that stressed God's judgment over His mercy, **Alphonsus Liguori** found liberation when he immersed himself in the Gospels and discovered that Jesus came to save us, not scare us.

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- **Angélique Arnaud**'s refusal to renounce spiritual perfectionism made her a leader of the fear-mongering Jansenist heresy. Her cautionary tale reminds us how spiritual elitism and ideological divisions corrode joy – and that cultivating joy is a crucial spiritual discipline.

The stories of these women and men remind us that spiritual perfectionism thrives in times of confusion, division, and scandal, Campbell says, times like those we are living in today. Yet these saints also remind us that during the most trying times of Christian history – amid the fall of Rome, corruption of the Middle Ages, contentiousness of the Reformation, and rise of modern atheism – God has used recovering perfectionists to heal and lead his people. God can do the same today, Campbell says, if we learn from these survivors of spiritual perfectionism how to let God purify and redirect our hard-wired desires for excellence.

“Spiritual perfectionism is the least recognized and most toxic form of perfectionism,” Campbell says. “It often lies at the root of other, more obvious forms, and it’s dangerous precisely because so many of us mistake it for virtue or deny that it afflicts us at all.” In *The Heart of Perfection*, Campbell explores how the wisdom of these saints “can help Christians in all walks of life navigate a competitive world without succumbing to its compulsions and trade the bondage of perfectionism for freedom in Christ.”

About the Author:

Colleen Carroll Campbell is an award-winning author, print and broadcast journalist, and former presidential speechwriter. Her books include her critically acclaimed journalistic study, *The New Faithful*, and spiritual memoir, *My Sisters the Saints*, which won two national awards and has been published in four languages. Colleen has written for *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christianity Today*, *America*, and *National Review*, and she has appeared on CNN, FOX News, MSNBC, ABC News, PBS, NPR, and EWTN, where she hosted her own television and radio shows for eight years. A former speechwriter for President George W. Bush and editorial writer and op-ed columnist for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Colleen is the recipient of two honorary doctorates and numerous other awards and fellowships for her work. She speaks to audiences across North America and Europe when she’s not home enjoying her husband and their four children, whom she homeschools. Her website is www.colleen-campbell.com.

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Suggested Interview Questions for Colleen Carroll Campbell

Author of *The Heart of Perfection*

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1. You're a lifelong overachiever, but didn't realize the extent of your perfectionist problem until you became a mom. How did motherhood open your eyes to the damage perfectionism can do – and to the danger of what you call “spiritual perfectionism”?
2. You've said spiritual perfectionism often lies at the root of other forms of perfectionism, so it must be addressed first. What is spiritual perfectionism, exactly? How does it relate to other forms of perfectionism that we discuss more often – concerns over social status, parenting skills, body image, and workaholism?
3. In your book, you call spiritual perfectionism one of the most “pervasive and insidious” problems today. What is it about contemporary culture that breeds striving, perfectionism, and workaholism? What makes today's believers particularly prone to spiritual perfectionism? Are certain types of believers more prone than others?
4. Many people think of the saints as perfectionists, not *recovered* perfectionists. You say there was a time when you worried that studying the lives of the saints might have fueled your perfectionism and you should avoid them to find healing. What changed your mind and made you immerse yourself in their stories?
5. Were you surprised to discover that there were saints who struggled with perfectionism? Did you find any characteristics common to these saints in terms of backgrounds or personalities? Did they all recognize themselves as perfectionists?
6. You distinguish between worldly perfectionism and Gospel perfection, saying we should drop the one and aim for the other. What's the difference?
7. A popular response to perfectionism today is to remind ourselves that we're perfect just the way we are. You say a better response is to recognize our hard-wired desires for excellence, then allow God to purify and redirect them. How did the saints do that?
8. The holy men and women you sought out for wisdom range from Francis of Assisi to Ignatius of Loyola to Jane de Chantal. Tell us what you've learned from them.
9. This book is about recovering perfectionist saints, but you included the story of an unrecovered perfectionist and infamous heretic, Angélique Arnaud. Why?
10. You say you never really “got” devotion to the heart of Jesus before studying ex-perfectionist saints. What did they teach you about the relevance his heart to our lives?
11. What are some concrete tips for readers who want to resist perfectionist tendencies?
12. What are your children learning from your efforts to overcome perfectionism?

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