“Everyone loves a hero,” wrote the American poet Phyllis McGinley in 1954, “and the saints are the best heroes of all.” Saints, like most heroes, have extraordinary abilities. Summoned by the faithful, they can inspire repentance in the most recalcitrant sinners, heal the most acute suffering, and reverse the most ravaging disease. These miracles, Catholics believe, are made possible only by saints’ eternal union with God. The faithful recall this during the most sacred part of their liturgy, the consecration of the Eucharist, when they join their prayers with those of the saints “on whose constant intercession in your presence we rely for unfailing help.”¹ Yet the appeal of saints in the Catholic imagination derives not only from their closeness to God but also from their proximity to believers. As envoys from heaven to earth, saints make the divine manifest in the everyday lives of the faithful. Through what McGinley called “the miracles they made of their own lives,” these holy men and women embody God’s grace, as it flows through humans in particular times and places.²

Catholics have devised an elaborate method for acknowledging their holy heroes, a series of intricate steps collectively known as the canonization process. Although this lengthy and tedious process often frustrates the promoters of a prospective saint, successes at its various stages also prompt exuberant celebrations, in which devotees marvel anew at the saints’ capacity to bridge the
human and the divine. “Heaven touched earth!” exclaimed a participant in a ritual marking one such milestone. Canonizations and their precursors, beatifications, have special meaning for those who feel particular affinity with the new saint by virtue of a shared profession, state of life, or geographical location. Through a separate canonical process, the Holy See at times officially designates canonized saints as “patrons” of a distinctive occupation, avocation, or place.

In terms of the latter category, Phyllis McGinley, like many other U.S. Catholics before her, felt decidedly overlooked. Aggrieved by what she saw as Rome’s “odd myopia” regarding the United States, McGinley chided the Vatican for failing to take notice of the “very American brand of holiness.” The absence of American names in the canon of the saints left many U.S. Catholics feeling not only spiritually unmoored but also periodically subject to the condescension of their transatlantic counterparts. In 1953, for instance, Englishman Donald Attwater published Saints Westward, ostensibly to encourage his “American friends” to promote native saints. Whereas Catholics “in Europe and the nearer parts of Asia” encountered saints “every day in the places where they lived,” Attwater sympathized, U.S. Catholics had to content themselves with cities and towns named for holy heroes who had lived an ocean away. “Saint Louis the saint had nothing to do with St. Louis the city,” he pointed out. “To be able to look upon actual buildings or scenes that the saint actually saw makes them wonderfully real and ‘living.’ The time will come when Americans will have this joy and privilege.”

A Saint of Our Own is about U.S. Catholics’ quest for that joy and privilege. It traces saint-seeking in the United States from the 1880s, the decade in which U.S. Catholics nominated their first candidates for canonization, to 2015, the year Pope Francis named the twelfth American saint in the first such ceremony held on U.S. soil. As the book will show, U.S. Catholics’ search for a saint of their own did indeed spring from a desire to persuade the Vatican to recognize their country’s holy heroes. But U.S. Catholic believers had another reason for touting homegrown holiness. To them, saints served as mediators not only between heaven and earth but also between the faith they professed and the American culture in which they lived. Canonization may be fundamentally about holiness, but it is never only about holiness. In the United States, it has often been about the ways in which Catholics defined, defended, and celebrated their identities as Americans. Saint-seekers nominated candidates for canonization based not only on the virtues they were said to have practiced but also on the national values they were understood to have epitomized. If the Catholic
criteria held constant, American ideals fluctuated dramatically between the 1880s and 2015—a factor that helps to explain both why the search for a U.S. patron saint is so revealing and why it ended in a way that would have surprised those who had launched it in the first place.

A Saint of Our Own focuses on multiple U.S. causes for canonization, including all the successful ones, as well as a few that are failed, forgotten, or still in process. The most illuminating causes receive more attention, and foremost among these is the one attached to Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton. Born in 1774 into an Episcopal family in New York, Seton converted to Catholicism as a widowed mother of five and later founded the Sisters of Charity, the first Catholic women’s religious community established in the United States without formal ties to a European congregation. Now a canonized saint, Seton is arguably the best known among the tiny subset of Americans who have received the church’s highest honor. Catholic schools and parishes throughout the country are named after Seton—far more institutions are dedicated to her, in fact, than to any of the other eleven U.S. canonized saints. Seton’s prominence on the contemporary American landscape notwithstanding, her path to canonization was beset with so many complications that at times its success had seemed unlikely. At one critical juncture in the mid-twentieth century, Seton’s cause attracted the support of New York’s Cardinal Francis Spellman. When making a case for Seton’s worthiness as a candidate for canonization, Spellman praised her above all for being “wholly American.” Seton, he observed, had been a “charter American citizen” who had “breathed American air,” “battled against odds in the trials of life with American stamina and cheerfulness,” and “worked and succeeded with American efficiency.” Her life, therefore, served as “a glorious tribute, by God’s grace, to the health, zeal, and spirituality” of Catholicism in the United States.

Seton and other U.S. saints were canonized not simply because they were holy people. They were canonized because a dedicated group in and subsequently beyond their inner circles wanted them to be remembered as holy people—and were willing to expend a considerable amount of time, effort, and resources to ensure that they would be. The primary and professed motive for these efforts may have been spiritual, rooted in a desire to inspire imitation and veneration at home and to deepen their connection to Rome and to God. As Spellman’s paean to Seton suggests, however, U.S. Catholics also relied on saints to advertise a particular “American brand” of holiness to Vatican leaders and to their fellow citizens.
The story of Seton’s labyrinthine journey to canonization is one of several threaded throughout *A Saint of Our Own*. The same twists and turns that exasperated generations of Seton’s supporters provide a particularly revealing example of how the vagaries of personality, the complexities of historical memory, and the intricacies of the canonization process can combine to make it difficult for even the holiest of people to enter the ranks of the canonized saints. But Seton’s saintly story can be fully understood only in tandem with those of the other potential patrons with whom she vied for paradigmatic American status, including ones who temporarily eclipsed her as well as those she ultimately overshadowed.

Because holy men and women gain popular support in specific contexts, studies of canonization can reveal as much about the priorities and interests of the people promoting the candidates as they do about the lives of the prospective saints themselves. Scholars of medieval and early modern Europe have long harnessed saints’ interpretive potential, demonstrating that new models of holiness emerged in response to shifting papal prerogatives and developments in the larger culture. By contrast, scholars of the Americas have only recently begun, in historian Peter Burke’s words, to analyze saints as “cultural indicators, a sort of historical litmus paper sensitive to connections between religion and society.” A *Saint of Our Own* is the first study of multiple causes for canonization in a U.S. context. By examining the many historical figures U.S. Catholics have offered as powerful expressions of Catholic virtue and American ideals, this book brings into focus U.S. Catholics’ understanding of themselves both as members of the church and as citizens of the nation—and reveals how those identities converged, diverged, and changed over time.

Canonization, by definition, institutionalizes a private devotion. *A Saint of Our Own* thus considers both popular piety and structures of power, subjects not often well integrated in scholarship on American religion. This has been especially true since the 1960s, when, in what Thomas A. Tweed has characterized as the field’s “quotidian turn,” scholars increasingly adopted as subjects ordinary people engaging in everyday religious practices. Influenced by social history and, in the case of Catholics, the Second Vatican Council, these historians offered a strikingly different perspective on the American religious past from that provided by their predecessors, who, in focusing on the men (and very few women) who exercised power within the church’s institutional structures, had overlooked “the people in the pews” almost entirely. In providing this much-needed revision, however, many scholars of popular or lived
religion overcorrected and ignored church structures in a way that also distorts the experience of the U.S. Catholic faithful, who engaged with those structures repeatedly and in a variety of ways. The search for an American saint offers a fascinating case in point. All causes for canonization begin when a group of ordinary people lift up the holy heroes who populate their everyday lives; successful ones end when the holiness of the candidate is validated, first by local church authorities and finally by the Vatican. Canonization accordingly offers one model for developing creative approaches that integrate ecclesiastical and lived religious history and merge the perspectives of institutional elites and ordinary people.14

Because canonization entails multiple back-and-forth exchanges between the Holy See and the country from which causes are proposed, it also lends itself extraordinarily well to a transnational approach. In particular, this study of canonization joins an emerging body of scholarship that encourages historians to “return to Rome” by acknowledging, as the first historians of the U.S. church did reflexively, the centrality of the Holy See to the American Catholic story.15 While U.S. Catholics’ allegiance to the pope did not, as many of their fellow citizens alleged, compromise their ability to become full-fledged Americans, their ties to Rome did distinguish them from non-Catholic Americans in important ways. Here again, acknowledging this in scholarship runs counter to an approach adopted since the 1960s and 1970s by church historians who were not only disinclined to feature institutional structures but also, in contrast to scholars of earlier generations, more likely to limit their subjects to what transpired within U.S. boundaries.16 As a matter of course, the story of canonization in America toggles between the United States and the Holy See; moreover, because most U.S. causes were conducted on behalf of candidates who belonged to religious congregations based in Italy or France, a third national entity was often involved. Examining U.S. Catholics’ search for a saint of their own helps us interpret their history in local, national, and transnational registers.

Canonization is much more complex than any shorthand description can suggest, and it would be helpful to summarize its broader meaning and history before continuing with our American story. In the eyes of Catholic believers, canonization reflects a truth about an individual’s afterlife in its literal sense. In raising a candidate to the “honors of the altar,” the church affirms that the saint, having practiced certain virtues to a heroic degree, passed immediately upon death into the company of God and all the saints, where he or she is an advocate for and inspiration to the faithful on earth. To understand why the
church elevates certain holy people and not others to the ranks of the canonized, as Peter Burke points out, we must look at both the periphery or local level, where devotion to the individual developed, and the center, where sainthood was made official.17

In the early church, there had been no distinction between periphery and center on the question of who was a saint; men and women were recognized as such either by tradition or popular acclamation. Between the tenth and seventeenth centuries, however, the Holy See increasingly reserved to itself the right of canonization, and eventually beatification. In 1588, Pope Sixtus V created the Sacred Congregation of Rites (from which emerged the present-day Congregation for the Causes of Saints) to oversee regulations on divine worship and the canonization of saints, and by 1634 Pope Urban VIII established the formal procedures that compose the “modern” canonization process.18 The centralization of saint-making in Rome reflected broader Catholic reforms in the post-Reformation period and brought into sharp relief a key difference in dogma between Protestants and Roman Catholics. While Protestants insisted that, because the faithful have unmediated access to God, there was no need for saints, Catholics believed that these holy heroes could facilitate a relationship with the divine through channels unavailable to humans alone. As emissaries between heaven and earth, Catholics held, saints helped devotees grow closer to God both by interceding on their behalf and by providing models of holiness that the faithful could emulate.

Whereas canonization changes nothing about the people so honored, merely certifying their heavenly status, it does transform the relationship between the faithful and the saint. While Catholics may privately invoke the intercession of any person they believe to be in God’s eternal presence, acts of public veneration—novenas, celebrations of feast days, recitation of prayers, or building of shrines—are reserved for the canonized or, in a limited capacity, to those who have reached the penultimate stage of the process, beatification.19 Indeed, part of the motivation for formalizing the saint-making process was a desire to curb the public honoring of those whose sanctity—or in some cases, whose very existence—church authorities deemed questionable.20 A common geography was the decisive factor in U.S. Catholics’ attraction to Seton and other prospective saints whose causes were introduced from the United States. Securing a national patron, in fact, was U.S. Catholics’ intention in nominating their first candidates for canonization.
INTRODUCTION

Yet a contradiction implicit in the canonization process made finding a U.S. patron more difficult than the early saint-seekers imagined. Viewed from the perspective of the center, the criteria for holiness are presumed to exist apart from time and place. “No popular acclaim, no national rivalry can make Saints,” insisted one U.S. authority in 1925. “The process is slow, deliberate, and strictly judicial.”21 Refracted through the lens of the periphery, however, sanctity appears much more fluid and historically contingent. Whether candidates would ultimately be canonized depended not just on how well their sanctity passed muster at the center but on how easily their lives could be framed to support U.S. Catholics’ vision of themselves as Americans—a vision that would change, as we will see, between the late nineteenth century and the present. A Saint of Our Own thus also highlights a perennial dissonance in the experience of U.S. Catholics, who belong to a church that moves slowly—in this case through an often painstakingly sluggish process—but live in a culture that changes easily and rapidly. Even in the exceptional cases where a cause for canonization moved quickly in Rome, the interval between its beginning and its successful conclusion could seem an eternity when measured by American standards. For most of their nation’s history, U.S. Catholics’ attachment to a newly canonized saint rarely matched the enthusiasm shown by the generation that had originally proposed the candidate. This dynamic helps to explain why the United States still does not have a national patron saint.

The two U.S. saints who came closest to being designated for this honor were Seton and Frances Cabrini, an Italian-born missionary who arrived in New York in 1889 and died in Chicago in 1917. Seton and Cabrini both have shrines in Manhattan, a coincidence that highlights the tendency of U.S. saint-seekers to foreground candidates with ties to the northeastern part of the country. (Of the twelve canonized U.S. saints, Seton, Cabrini, and four others had roots in New York, while an additional two had come from Philadelphia.) Seton and Cabrini shared similar saintly stories, but one critical difference between them is particularly instructive. From start to finish, Cabrini’s cause for canonization spanned less than twenty years, while Seton’s took almost a century to complete. The differential mostly derived from the fact that Cabrini’s advocates had close ties to the Vatican while Seton’s did not. Also contributing to the gap, however, was an unexamined provision in church law that lends itself to an exploration of how women in patriarchal religious traditions seek to become actors in history.
It is widely acknowledged that church leaders have long used models of female sanctity to control and contain women—and that Catholic women have, conversely, cited the example of female saints as justifications for expanding gender roles. While *A Saint of Our Own* considers the ways in which expectations about female behavior shaped models of holiness, its more innovative approach to the study of gender and sanctity lies in its examination of the role of women as petitioners, the group of people who initiate and sponsor causes for canonization. Until 1983, canon law stipulated that women could petition the Holy See only through male proxies. In charting U.S. Catholic women’s struggle to maneuver around this requirement and uncovering the surprises that followed success, *A Saint of Our Own* provides a fascinating glimpse into both the history of women in the Catholic Church and the complicated relationship between gender and power in the church in the early twenty-first century.

The above reference to canon law invites an important reminder about the daunting complexities of the modern canonization process. Peter Gumpel, SJ, an erudite Jesuit who worked at the Vatican’s Congregation for the Causes of Saints for over four decades, captured them well: “I am not considered to be stupid,” Gumpel observed, “and it took me six or seven years before I could begin to understand the whole business.” Gumpel enters our story in our final chapter, but for now, his words are intended to remind readers that this book will not provide a detailed analysis of the convoluted procedures through which the church confirms the citizens of heaven. While *A Saint of Our Own* describes elements of the process as it tracks U.S. candidates through its major steps, it primarily considers saints’ “afterlives” in a figurative sense, exploring how citizenship status in the United States affected both their journeys to the honors of the altar and their place in American historical memory.

This panoramic view of American sanctity broadens the scope of canonization to encompass not only “official” narratives but also the multivalent turning points along any saintly trajectory. An instructive case in point is the “beginning” of Seton’s cause. Records of Seton’s congregation, as well as documentation submitted to the Holy See, pinpoint 22 August 1882 as its definitive start date. On that day Archbishop (later Cardinal) James Gibbons of Baltimore visited Seton’s community at its headquarters in Emmitsburg, Maryland, and, while saying Mass at Seton’s tomb, was inspired to nominate her as a saint. After Mass the archbishop shared his idea with the sisters and asked them to consider opening Seton’s cause for canonization, allowing that doing so might countermand their natural instincts. “I know,” he told them, “that the Sisters
of Charity do not love nor seek to be known” but “love instead the silences, the shade, the obscurity.” Yet, he went on, “I wondered whether there would not be a day in which the Church would bring [Seton] to the Altar, and whether it might indeed be our task to initiate the necessary steps toward her canonization.” While volunteering to “gladly take the initiative, if I had any encouragement,” he acknowledged that “the first movement must naturally begin here.”23 Here Gibbons was referring to two customary practices in opening causes for canonization: that they be launched from the diocese in which the candidate had died, and that nominations were to come from the laity rather than the clerical hierarchy.24 Because Catholic sisters are not ordained and thus are members of the laity, Gibbons urged them to overcome their natural reticence and to contemplate opening Seton’s cause, assuring them that its success would ultimately produce “the best results” for the women who carried on Seton’s legacy. Multiple sources attest that the sisters agreed to follow his suggestion.

Upon closer examination, however, Gibbons’s graveside vision appears less an inspired and decisive catalyst than the moment when national interests intersected with a long-cherished desire of Seton’s spiritual daughters. It may well have been true that the sisters generally avoided publicity, but it most assuredly was not the case that they had never before considered proposing their founder for canonization. On the contrary, evidence suggests that Seton’s closest companions had intended to pursue her cause for canonization long before 1882—and had in fact planned to do so from the very moment of her death in 1821. Seton’s spiritual director, Simon Bruté, a French missionary priest who became the first bishop of Vincennes, Indiana, in 1834, enjoined the mourning sisters to be attentive at her deathbed: “Gather the fragments, lest they be lost.” This was recognized as a sign that Bruté and others anticipated opening Seton’s cause for canonization, as the founder’s body, and anything it had ever touched, could serve as relics that her devotees could use to venerate and to invoke her intercession.25

An episode at Seton’s graveside a quarter century after her death further signaled that her congregation had intended to initiate her canonization process well in advance of Gibbons’s prompt. On 20 June 1846, when Seton’s body was exhumed in preparation for a transfer to a new tomb, the sisters present prayed fervently to find an intact corpse. Sister Lucina Simms later remembered their “disappointment” and “emotion” at the scene: “For one moment we saw the blackened skull, eyeless sockets in the black skull—just for one moment, and then all sank to dust at the bottom of the coffin. Mother Xavier had expected to
find the remains intact.” Because incorruptibility is but one indicator of sanctity rather than an essential precondition of it, the discovery hardly spelled the end of Seton’s chances for canonization. Still, one sister was so disheartened by their discovery that she “begged with irresistible earnestness” to be allowed a bone fragment for comfort. She received one of the small bones of the toes.26

Given Seton’s credentials as the founder of a religious congregation, especially one that represented a historic American first, it was not surprising that she emerged as a candidate for canonization. The canon of the saints is dense with founders and firsts. Yet as we will see, even as the sister comforted herself with Seton’s toe bone, a chain of events was unfolding that would transform what is usually an advantage in canonization—membership in a religious congregation—into a dangerous encumbrance and jeopardize Seton’s chances to a far greater extent than would her bodily decomposition. A rupture within her congregation would later generate competing narratives about Seton’s founding vision and cast a long shadow over her life and legacy. The extent of this problem, though, was not yet apparent in 1882, when Gibbons spoke to Seton’s Emmitsburg congregation—or, more precisely, to what was by then one of six separate religious communities that looked to Seton as a founder.

Just as those earlier events indicate that the sisters’ annals were not entirely accurate in attributing the idea of canonizing Seton solely to the archbishop, the momentum building for a number of other U.S. causes also belied the apparent spontaneity of Gibbons’s inspiration. His words to Seton’s spiritual daughters that August afternoon made clear that they would not be the only ones to benefit should her cause succeed. Canonizing Seton, Gibbons maintained, would validate the entire U.S. church in adding one of their number to the roster of the saints for the very first time. “American saints,” he reminded them, “are rare birds,” and thus “it would be great to see the name of Mother Seton on a list, alas, too short!”27

Gibbons’s lament was only one sign of a saintly inferiority complex that had developed in the U.S. Catholic Church. In the decades to come, Gibbons would often remind U.S. Catholics that holy men and women had lived not only across the ocean but among them on this side of the water. In 1891, for example, he admonished the citizens of Vincennes, Indiana, that they “need not go on pilgrimages to visit the tombs of saints. There is one reposing here in your midst, namely, the saintly founder of this diocese, the Right Reverend Simon Bruté.” Gibbons’s effort to promote America’s holy heroes was part of U.S. Catholics’ larger attempt to secure, in the words of John Gilmary Shea,
the era’s leading American Catholic intellectual, patron saints who “lived and labored and sanctified themselves in our land, among circumstances familiar.”

The search for homegrown holiness—nurtured in the United States, validated by the Vatican—knitted together a number of impulses that shaped the church in the late nineteenth century. It reflected in part U.S. Catholics’ desire to strengthen the bonds of attachment between themselves and the Holy See. Even as the church in Italy lost its sovereign power in the wake of Italian unification—thereby consigning the pope to “prisoner” status behind the walls of the tiny Vatican state, the remnant of the church’s once-vast territory—it had increased its spiritual hold over Catholics in Europe and across the Atlantic. In the late nineteenth century, as one churchman put it, U.S. Catholics “turned Romeward, as naturally as the needle seeks the North.” Historian James O’Toole has described a number of phenomena that signaled this turn toward Rome. First, U.S. Catholics contributed more and more to Peter’s Pence, a global collection taken up to support the pope’s specific initiatives. Second, they looked approvingly at the rising number of U.S. priests awarded the title “Monsignor,” an honorary title conferred by the pope for service to the church. Finally, U.S. Catholics increasingly recited special prayers intended to help the pontiff in his political distress. Nominating prospective patron saints offered U.S. Catholics another opportunity to bind themselves spiritually to the Holy See.

U.S. Catholics launched their quest for a saint in the midst of a structural as well as a spiritual transformation in the American church. When Gibbons had visited Emmitsburg, the United States was still classified as a “mission territory” by the Vatican and operated under the jurisdiction of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith or, as it was often called, Propaganda Fide. Throughout the 1880s and beyond, correspondence between U.S. bishops and Propaganda Fide increased in frequency and treated more and more complex matters, prompting the Vatican to recognize the growing vigor and import of the American church and to increase its awareness of the singular challenges the church faced in a religiously pluralistic society. U.S. Catholics, meanwhile, were beginning to conceive of themselves as an organized, self-sustaining church on par with Catholicism in European countries rather than as a precarious mission territory. Pursuing a saint of their own helped reinforce this identity. Practically, the quest proved that the church had the necessary financial and institutional wherewithal to sponsor a cause; symbolically, the effort implied that uniquely American expressions of holiness were tantamount to those manifest in European countries where nationalism and sanctity had
long been intertwined.\footnote{30} Even as U.S. Catholics proposed their first potential saints, for instance, their counterparts in France were looking to fifteenth-century Joan of Arc as both a national hero and a holy one. Using Joan’s story to buttress their cause, French nationalists helped her advance to beatification in 1909. During World War I, Joan became even more potent as a French national symbol, and she was canonized in its aftermath.\footnote{31}

The relationship between saint-seeking and nation-building was less straightforward in the United States, where Catholicism had long been a controversial minority religion, than it was in France or other Catholic nations of Europe. Anti-Catholicism’s most violent eruptions in the United States, such as the 1834 convent burning in Charlestown, Massachusetts, and the 1844 “Bible riots” in Philadelphia, had taken place in the antebellum period. Although regional loyalties were more pronounced than religious divides in the Civil War era, prejudice against Catholics resurfaced as a national force in the late nineteenth century, in part as a response to Catholics’ growing influence and power in multiple realms. Members of the American Protective Association, for example, an anti-Catholic organization founded in 1887, vowed to never vote for a Catholic, go on strike with a Catholic, or hire a Catholic if a Protestant was available. In the minds of many Protestants, an alarming increase in migration from southern and eastern Europe magnified the Catholic menace. These newcomers were suspect not only because of their supposed allegiance to Rome but also because of their concentration in urban areas and industrial occupations. A number of U.S. Catholics looked to canonization as a remedy for this tense situation, believing that securing a national patron would help diminish anti-Catholicism, however dubious the proposition that one of the most provocative and exotic markers of Catholic difference could function as an agent of Catholic assimilation might seem.

Cementing a connection to the Holy See, presenting the American church as well beyond its infancy, and affirming U.S. Catholicism’s place in the nation: a great deal rested on a prospective patron, and for almost fifty years it would be more than Elizabeth Ann Seton’s afterlife could sustain. The first U.S. saint-seekers, in fact, did not look primarily to Seton to fulfill their high expectations. As well known as Seton’s name was throughout the United States, her life story could not be easily crafted into the particular messages U.S. Catholics of that era wanted to send to the Holy See and to their fellow citizens. Indeed, two years after his visit to Emmitsburg, Archbishop Gibbons, acting on behalf of all U.S. bishops, would take an important step in launching the first cause for canonization from the United States but for a different candidate:
Tekakwitha, an indigenous convert to Catholicism born in 1656 in what became Auriesville, New York. Together with the Jesuit missionaries with whom her story was entwined, the “Lily of the Mohawks” would outshine Seton both as a holy exemplar and as an American icon, albeit for a limited time. This was part of the reason why the Holy See did not even officially introduce Seton’s cause for canonization until 1940, almost sixty years after Gibbons’s visit to Emmitsburg. At that point, Rome would permanently register Seton as the “second flower” of American sanctity recognizing that she had first blossomed in the holy shadow of a “Lily.”

New American moments generated new models of holiness. *A Saint of Our Own* reveals the “abundant” presence of holy heroes in U.S. Catholics’ American story: during a landmark gathering of U.S. bishops in 1884, an exuberant public celebration in Chicago in 1926, a papal conclave in 1939, the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, and a charismatic pope’s visit to Philadelphia in 1979. Saints were also present during another momentous occasion for Catholics and their fellow citizens in September 2015—the event that provides a capstone to the book. Welcoming Pope Francis to the White House, President Barack Obama gave the pontiff a gift intended to evoke a meaningful connection between the Catholic Church and the United States. The exchange marked a significant departure within the long sweep of the nation’s history. For most of that history, the prospect of a pope visiting the White House would have been cause for alarm rather than celebration, and the notion that a U.S. president would extend to a pope the courtesies reserved for a head of state would have been considered anathema. The gift itself, however, signaled continuity, in that it relied on a canonized saint to express Catholicism’s resonance in American culture. The carefully chosen artifact—a key that unlocked Elizabeth Ann Seton’s home in Emmitsburg—affirmed Seton’s status as a woman perched at the nexus of holiness and American history.

*A Saint of Our Own* takes readers inside the stories of Seton and other U.S. Catholic historical figures who have occupied this privileged position, including some who did so only fleetingly. The afterlives of these saints are interspersed with those of other candidates who, despite their supporters’ aspirations, never quite attained iconic American status. The book ends with a brief examination of a few pending saints who might qualify as quintessential Americans, were their sponsors inclined to advance such an argument. That they are not so inclined points to a decisive shift in the U.S. Catholic story. Saint-seekers would spend almost a century proposing candidates whom they
envisioned as embodiments of their uniquely American brand of holiness. The components of that American brand, however, changed far more rapidly than causes for canonization proceeded. Consequently it was not until 1975 that U.S. Catholics welcomed a saint who plausibly matched the moment in which they found themselves—and by then, a desire to prove and explain Catholics’ Americanness had lost most of its force for U.S. saint-seekers. Once polarization within the church supplanted marginalization in America as the defining ethos of U.S. Catholicism, favorite saints would convey far less than they once did about U.S. Catholics’ understandings of American identity. Instead, since the 1970s, candidates for canonization have increasingly emerged from debates over what it means to be Catholic and signify where their supporters position themselves on some of the most divisive issues in church and American society.

This situation highlights the deep irony at the core of this book’s main argument. U.S. Catholics had originally sought a saint of their own in the hope that finding one would prove that they belonged in the United States. Ultimately, it would be the search itself, rather than its outcome, that proclaimed Catholics’ Americanness most loudly. In each new moment, U.S. Catholics spoke about holy heroes in language that reflected not simply their sacred beliefs but the same secular developments—nation-building, urbanization, industrialization, depression, war, global politics, or social and cultural change—that were shaping the lives of all Americans. Officially, U.S. Catholics had to make the case that prospective saints had practiced the theological and cardinal virtues: faith, hope, charity, prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice. Unofficially, it mattered a great deal to them that these men and women could also be said to have embraced American virtues and participated in American projects. Expressed as a Catholic initiative, the search for a wholly American saint unfolded as a history of the United States in the long twentieth century.

What follows is a complicated yet captivating tale that, while requiring occasional forays into esoteric regulations, demonstrates saints’ potential to exacerbate and reconcile tensions between Catholics and Protestants and between Rome and America. *A Saint of Our Own* offers insight into the ways causes for canonization expose divisions within U.S. Catholicism, including those between men and women, between the clergy and the laity, and among religious congregations, ideological camps, racial and ethnic groups, and regional constituencies. This story takes us on multiple Atlantic crossings, as we shadow American holy heroes and interpret the lives of the Catholics who loved, invoked, and promoted them.