

All Saints' Day

31st October 2021

'What you should want is: to be a saint'

Apoc 7: *a huge number, impossible to count ...*

Ps 23: *such are the men who seek your face O Lord*

1Jn 3: *the love the Father has lavished on us by letting us be called God's children*

Mt 5: 1–12: the beatitudes

This solemn feastday of 'All Saints' comes to us at the start of November, a month when autumn really kicks in: the clocks have changed back, the evenings are darker and colder; and nature starts to remind us of the part that death and decay play in the material world. But All Saints' is in fact a bright and beautiful feast — one we are so in need of at this time of year! And I propose that the saints whom we think of today — that "*vast multitude*" spoken of in Apocalypse, that "*great cloud of witnesses*" that the Letter to the Hebrews mentions — are there to be our inspiration, our heavenly light and guide, through this earthly life of ours, which of necessity has its darker times, its sadnesses and times of death.

The tradition of honouring the saints goes back a long way in the life of the Church, right back to the catacombs in Rome, where Mass was celebrated on the tombs of those early martyred Christians. Subsequently,

the Pope in the year 609 re-purposed the Pantheon (a pagan Roman temple) in Rome to be a church in honour of all the saints, and he re-buried there 28 cartloads (!!) of the relics of saints and martyrs. This church he consecrated as *Sancta Maria ad Martyres*, the beginning of the formalization of the universal feast of All Saints', although such a feast did have even more ancient origins in the 4th c. The date of the feast moved from its original one in mid-May to the current one of 1st November by the mid-8th c., which may have been in response to countering certain autumnal pagan festivals evoking the spirits of the dead. For, instead, the saints in glory are a living proof of the power of God to bring to real life after death — a new and better life — dispelling the dark overtones of pagan myths about the dead.

Honouring the saints is also a normal and human response to those to whom we naturally look up to in our Christian lives. The saints are the 'heroes' of our faith — but not heroes who have achieved this by their own merits. The lives of the saints point away from their own

achievements, and point instead towards God: God's grace has won the victory in their lives; God's Spirit has brought them to holiness and to heaven.

No doubt we all have our favourite saints — for some of us that may be the saint after whom we were named; for some of us it may be the saint whose name we adopted at Confirmation; for others it may be a saint connected to our country or town of birth; for others it might be a saint whose life we are in awe of, someone whose life story is so attractive and inspiring. This is important, to *want* to be with the saints, to see their company, the Church, as our home too, our destiny. But it's important at the same time not to consider sainthood to be far from us, alien to us, beyond us. It is not.

Shortly after he converted to Catholicism in the late 1930s, Thomas Merton — who went on to be a Trappist monk and great spiritual writer — was walking the streets of New York with his friend, Robert Lax who was Jewish. Lax asked Merton what he wanted to be, now that he was a Catholic. "I don't know," Merton replied, adding simply that he wanted to be a good Catholic. Lax stopped him in his tracks. "What you should say is that you want to be a saint!" Merton was

dumbfounded. "How do you expect me to become a saint?", Merton asked him. Lax said: "All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one. Don't you believe that God will make you what He created you to be, if you will consent to let him do it? All you have to do is desire it."

When we look at the lives of the saints we see ordinary human beings who have won through, despite their human weaknesses. We should want, with all our hearts, then, to be (like the) saints, to be with them in heaven. We too share their human weaknesses, but we too should have faith that God can overcome in us those weaknesses. Many of the saints' lives started off far from saintly! Think of St Augustine, for example. He wasn't even baptized until 32; the constant prayers of his mother over his early decades, and the example of the bishop of Milan, St Ambrose, eventually brought him to see the light of God shining on him with love and persistence. St Ignatius, too, was a soldier not given much to thoughts of a Christian character, until he was wounded in battle at the age of 30, and had time to reflect, read the life of Christ and the saints, and have his life completely turned around;

he became the founder of the Jesuits, the religious order to which Pope Francis belongs. This sort of story is repeated over and over again: God works His miracles in the lives of the saints, and turns their lives around, brings them to achieve great things for others, and to witness to many of the healing, forgiving, passionate love of Christ.

Saints are not plaster-cast statues, but living flesh and blood; men and women who have lived real lives in real situations of challenge in the real world. Often they have overcome huge difficulties and sufferings, by God's grace, constantly turning all things back to Him in prayer and trust. We can be like them! We can have this desire for life, to be a saint!

Reading the lives of the saints can be really uplifting! And I suggest that that's exactly what we do today: find a saint to read up on. Some, like the apostles, we know little about, even though they're fundamental to the Church's beginning; others, perhaps who've lived in more recent centuries, we have far greater information on, a rather complete biography. Just a year ago, in Assisi, a

most astonishing new *beatus* was declared: [Blessed Carlo Acutis](#). He was born and baptized in 1991 in London to Italian parents, lived most of his life in Milan, and died of cancer at only 15yrs of age in 2006, and buried in Assisi. He was certainly a teenager of the new millennium, with interests in football and great skills in computing; but above all he had a deep and lively faith in Christ, and a fervent devotion to the Holy Eucharist. He dedicated himself to simplicity, and to purity, and whilst being a lover of jokes and great humour, he also had his sights set well and truly on heaven. How can we not be moved when we hear such accounts of a normal Italian teenager showing such sanctity; and how can we not be given such hope for our own lives as Christians trying to be saints?

Our feast day, in this regard, isn't only limited to the named, canonized saints of the Church's declaration. Yes, the Church is right to name saints, those who are without doubt in the glory of heaven. But beyond all these named saints is the "*huge number, impossible to count*" that we heard of in the first reading, in John's vision in the

Apocalypse. Heaven is alive with all those who, dying in goodness, and purified of their sins, are now in eternal rest and happiness with God. They may not be named and held up as canonized examples of saints, but — please God — many of our deceased relatives and friends are, or soon will be, saints in heaven. They call to us to be with them; we should gaze on that image of heaven and see our home; that place where we should be at home.

Are we doing all we can to stay focussed in this life, on getting to heaven: avoiding sin; confessing and being forgiven our failings; keeping to prayer and the sacraments with diligence and love for God? The Beatitudes, which we heard just then from the mouth of Jesus, are an important guide to what it means to attain blessedness. We would do well, this All Saints' Day, to read those words gently again and let them resound in our souls: *to be poor in spirit, ... peacemakers, ... gentle, ... hungering and thirsting for righteousness* ... so as to have our souls attuned to what blessedness really means.

Yes, Lord, you give me all the means necessary to be

a saint; please let me not ignore Your gift, Your instruction; your sacraments; Your graces. May the prayers of your many holy saints inspire me to live a life worthy of a heavenly reward.