

All Saints' Day

2nd November 2025

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

Apoc 7: *a great multitude that no-one could number ...*

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

1Jn 3: *we shall God as He really is*

Mt 5: 1–12: the Beatitudes

This solemn feast of 'All Saints' comes to us at the outset 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' Day 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 “*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 its times of death.

The tradition of honouring the saints goes back a long way in the life of the Church, right to the catacombs in Rome where Mass was habitually celebrated on the tombs of those early martyred Christians. Subsequently, the Pope in the year 609AD re-purposed the Pantheon in

Rome (a spectacular, round, pagan temple built by Emperor Hadrian) 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 formalizing the universal feast of All Saints' (although such a feast did have even more ancient origins in the 4th c.) By the mid-8th c. the feast was moved from its original date in mid-May to 1st November, 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 a normal human response to those to whom we naturally look up to in our Christian lives. The saints are 'heroes' of our faith, but not heroes 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 a favourite saint. We had a fascinating round-table discussion on this last Wednesday at LSE CathSoc: St Thomas, St Thérèse of Lisieux, St Maximilian Kolbe, ‘Servant of God’ Sr Clare Crockett all got a mention. For some of us it 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 story is attractive and that we are in awe of. It’s important to *want* to be with the saints and to see their company, the heavenly Church, as our home too, our destiny. We should not 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?” 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. We share their human weaknesses, but we 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, whose Rule of Life guides the religious order of Pope Leo. Augustine wasn’t even baptized until 32; the constant prayers of **St Monica**, 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, in the 16th c. 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 belonged. 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 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! I suggest that that's exactly what you 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, who've lived in more recent centuries, we have far greater information on, a rather complete biography. Just a few weeks ago, at the start of September in Rome, a most astonishing new saint was declared by Pope Leo: **St 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 absolutely 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 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?

This weekend is of great significance for us Catholics in England, as our latest English saint, **Cardinal John Henry Newman** — our Chaplaincy's patron — was declared yesterday by Pope Leo in Rome the most recent 'Doctor of the Church.' Only 38 saints, men & women, have been given such a title, in recognition of their enormous contribution to theology and spirituality. Along with receiving that title, Newman was also elevated to be co-patron with St Thomas Aquinas of the Church's educational mission. [The Pope reflected](#) on our great Saint and on his links to education. Allow me to quote a few of his lines from yesterday:

We must work together to set humanity free from the encircling gloom of nihilism, which is perhaps the most dangerous malady of contemporary culture, since it threatens to 'cancel' hope. This reference to the darkness that surrounds us echoes one of St John Henry Newman's best-known texts, the hymn "Lead, Kindly Light." In that beautiful prayer, we come to realize that we are far from home, our feet are unsteady, we cannot interpret clearly the way ahead. Yet none of this impedes us, since we have found our Guide: "*Lead, Kindly Light, amid th'encircling*

gloom, Lead Thou me on; the night is dark, and I am far from home, Lead Thou me on."

The task of education is precisely to offer this *Kindly Light* to those who might otherwise remain imprisoned by the particularly insidious shadows of pessimism and fear. ... I thus encourage you to ensure that schools, universities and every educational context ... are always gateways to a civilization of dialogue and peace.

We can say, then, that from a Christian perspective education helps everyone to become saints. Nothing less will do. Pope Benedict XVI, on his Apostolic Journey to Great Britain in September 2010, during which he beatified John Henry Newman, invited young people to become saints with these words: "*What God wants most of all for each one of you is that you should become holy. He loves you much more than you could ever begin to imagine.*"

I pray that Catholic education will help each person to discover their own call to holiness. St Augustine, whom St John Henry Newman greatly admired, once said that we are fellow students who have one Teacher, whose school is on earth and whose chair is in heaven (cf. *Serm.* 292,1).

Our feast day, today, however, 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 these named saints is the "*great multitude that no-one could number*" that we heard of in the 1st 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 vision 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 there in the Gospel from the mouth of Jesus, are an important guide to what it means to attain

blessedness / beatitude. We would do well, this All Saints' Day, to read those words gently again later: 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, and of the blissful company of Your saints for ever.