

The Celebration of All Saints Day  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
7 November 2021

John 11:32-44

I grew up in a culture filled with saints, angels and evil spirits. Everyone was worried about the “Evil Eye,” which was caused by envious people passing on illnesses to you or your children just by looking at you. You never let your children wander out at night because you knew “La Llorona” would come and drown them in the local rivers. You always knew that everyone had a patron saint: If you were abandoned by your parents, you prayed to St. Luigi Orione. If you suffered from arthritis, you prayed to Saint James the Greater. If you were a traveler in need of protection, you prayed to St. Christopher. And don't forget about St. Expedite, if you need something done in a hurry. He is the patron saint of computer programmers, delivery people, and Nerd Culture. ([http://www.catholicsupply.com/christmas/saint\\_meaning.html](http://www.catholicsupply.com/christmas/saint_meaning.html).)

This was a world where everyone had a guardian angel to protect you from danger, where the spirits of the dead were always with you and looked after you, and where you had a saint for all calamities, all blessings, and all professions. Teachers, doctors, scientists, and even prostitutes, had a patron saint who would intercede on their behalf. They translated our prayers to Jesus, they were our defense attorney, and they advocated for us with God himself. Of course, the ultimate saint and advocate was none other than the Virgin Mary herself. If you had her on your corner, you were golden!

These popular beliefs were encouraged by many entrepreneurs who sold their scapulars and novenas at local bookstores, market stalls, and religious bookstores. And in many ways, the Church encouraged this piety because it built devotion to the church and inspired people's generosity. People would bring an animal for the Church on the feast of St. Isidore, and would pay the church for the 30-masses for the dead after each person died, resulting in a constant source of revenue. Additionally, people would offer gifts of thanksgiving to the church when a saint helped them find their keys, rescued them from the Evil Eye, healed them of some obscure disease, or helped them find their way home.

As much as I can criticize these practices for the obvious abuses, what frustrated me the most was the distance that these practices created between average people and the saints. For us growing up, the saints were these super-good people who had such an abundance of grace that God allowed them permission to do great supernatural acts on behalf of average people. They could levitate, bi-locate, heal by just looking at you, and do all sorts of great things. The Saints were the information technology superstore for the church. We didn't need Steve Jobs, the Internet, or any apps. We had a saint for all problems and all reasons. Are you lost? We have a saint for that! Do you have constipation? We have a saint for that! Your girlfriend left you and now you are depressed? Worry not, we have a saint for that! The problem with this understanding of

the saints as the super-endowed, the super-good, the super-graceful is that this understanding leaves both you and I out. We don't levitate! We don't bi-locate! And the only magic power many of us have is the power to turn our paychecks into groceries or shoes for our kids!

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, and I wonder if today is only about the super-good, the super-religious, the super-heroic, the ones whose faith was superior to ours? People with names like "Remigius," "Ursula," or "John Paul"? I wonder if today we should do one more novena, wear scapulars with the relics of dead saints encased by protective pouches, or perhaps celebrate the day by trying to find our patron saint among the thousands of saints the church has canonized over the last 2,000 years. I wonder if today is about these people our church has elevated to the pedestal of the extraordinary?

The answer to the question depends on your understanding of the word "Saint." If for you a saint is someone whose manner of life was extraordinary, who is said to have experienced a supernatural type of faith, or who at the right moment sacrificed his life for the advancement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then the answer is "yes." If your understanding of "Saint" leads you to believe that these people were somehow "greater than the average human" then today is about them!

I believe, however, that this feast goes further. The word "Saint" in the original language means "Holy," which literally means "set apart." Another translation could be "Consecrated," and yet another translation could be "Made Special." When we use the full understanding of the word "saint" as "a holy person," "a person set apart" for the service of God, or a person "consecrated" to God, then this feast becomes accessible to all of us. We can understand "All Saints Day" as the day of celebration in which we give thanks to God for all the "Holy People," both dead and alive whom he has set-apart for his service and set-apart for a special relationship with him. All of those throughout the ages who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and have lived authentic Christian lives.

The question now becomes, "How does a person become holy, how is the saint set-apart?" I believe the answer to these questions can be found in Holy Scripture. First, in the Old Testament a "holy thing" becomes holy by contact with another holy thing. "For seven days make atonement for the altar and consecrate it. Then the altar will be most holy, and whatever touches it will be holy" (Exodus 29:37). Likewise, a High Priest becomes "Holy" by contact with the holy vessels in the Temple. In the New Testament we have the story that comes from the Gospel of John today: Lazarus is dead in the tomb, already smelling, buried for four days, totally unable to do anything whatsoever to set himself apart for the service of God, and totally unable to earn in any way, shape or form, the privilege to have a special relationship with Christ.

Yet, Christ brings him to life. Christ chooses to set him apart for a great relationship with him. Christ brings him from death into life, from sin into forgiveness,

from ultimate destruction into ultimate victory. It is Christ who does the setting apart, it is Christ who deems us Holy, it is Christ who makes us “saints.” It is Christ who, out of love and out of compassion, calls us by name to himself, initiates the great relationship, and consecrates us for his service. We are “Holy” because we have come into contact with “The Holy.” Better yet, we are holy because “The Holy,” Jesus Christ of Nazareth, has come into contact with us!

For us, Christians, this is exactly what Baptism in the Church does for us. At baptism we are forgiven, we are brought out of the life of sin into a life of victory with Christ, and we are set-apart for the service of God. Christ comes into contact with us. He commissions us to do his work among the nations, to be instruments of his love for those in need, to be the proclaimers of his good news, and to be a blessing to all around us. At baptism we are called into a special relationship with Christ. We are made “Holy,” we are made “Saints.”

Today we celebrate the lives of all of our ancestors who were set-apart for a relationship with Jesus. They were men and women who sat on pews similar to the ones on which you are seating, worshipped in front of similar altars, cried for forgiveness on the similar kneelers, and were purified through the same waters of baptism. They broke bread together and shared in the Lord’s supper, fully confident of the promises made by Jesus that those who believe in him will live forever. We today give thanks for their ministry and their legacy. We owe them a great debt of gratitude and today we say thanks for the beautiful worship spaces they have left us, and the Christian inheritance they passed on to us.

Today is about us who at baptism were set-apart for the service of God, most especially through our love for our brothers and sisters. And today we pray that we may live into that relationship with Christ in profound and amazing ways. That we may remain faithful to our baptismal covenant and become ambassadors of Christ to the world. Amen!