

“Keeping Up with the Saints”

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Out of a multitude of sermons diligently heard, and not a few hewn in hope for any and all occasions, I have often wondered: why do we Baptists stand mute on All Saints Day? Have we no living versions of sanctity among our own or, if failing there, at least a vision of “the communion of saints” within the larger Christian family?

The Catholic tradition has its calendar of saints, but the churches of the Reformation have never made much of that. It is sometimes maintained that Protestantism recognizes no saints in that special sense, not because it does not honor sanctity but because it has rediscovered the meaning of sainthood in the New Testament. Can it also be that, easily content with Christian mediocrity, we are tempted to say, “The saints are not in my class. I’ll be content to pass up the honors course and just make the grade”?

The word “saint” is not an easy and natural part of our Christian vocabulary. Our uneasiness with the word is attributable to several common distortions in our understanding of the term: (1) It is associated in many minds with perfection or a spiritual elite, and this hardly comports with our daily inner struggle with the downward pull of evil, the unsuccessful moral warfare described by the Apostle Paul: “I desire to do what is right, but wrong is all that I can manage” (Rom. 7:21). We experience this reality of a divided self to the extent that we are reluctant to present a more imposing image to the world. (2) The word conjures up the image of a sanctimonious person of grave demeanor or austerity, the kind of juiceless soul described by George A. Gordon when he said, “I think I never met a saint in my life with whom I cared to spend an hour.” Jesus both encountered and condemned a stale and stodgy piety. William Law, actually a truly saintly man who wrote *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, was once described as one who “lived joyfully with exceeding gravity.” A London newspaper once advertised: “A domestic servant wanted, a Christian, cheerful if possible.” Such descriptions call to mind the person of prim and forbidding rectitude or one of dour, reluctant piety in whom there is no lilt in the heart and no festivals in life. (3) The word “saint” is sometimes

associated in our minds with the sentimental do-gooder who goes about busily dispensing goodness with a kind of self-conscious virtue. C. S. Lewis satirized such an individual in *The Screwtape Letters*: “She lived for others; you could tell the others by their hunted look.” Obviously this is the opposite of the “disinterested sanctity” described by St. John of the Cross: “You should do your good deeds in such a way that, if it were possible, not even God himself would know that you are doing them.” Jesus warned of a showy piety designed for exhibition.

While we are justly put off by these distortions, the word “saint” comes down to us out of the Christian tradition with a great history. Paul reminded the motley assortment of people at Corinth, “You are called to be saints.” He wrote to “the saints at Ephesus.” To his friends in Philippi he said, “The saints salute you.” To the saints in particular households he sent greetings. There was an almost universal use of the term “saints” in the first century. What, then, is implied in the word?

The term “saints” is rooted in the Old Testament tradition, for Israel was chosen by God to be “a people for his own possession.” In the New Testament the saints are perceived as those who have inherited the covenant privileges and have their vocation in the world as a consecrated people who are set apart for God’s possession, use, and service. Paul viewed the saints as the heirs of God’s promises, the objects of pastoral care, and persons so transformed by love that a spontaneous outpouring of charity flows from their lives. They possessed a spirit of inner integrity in a combination of gentleness, strength, and goodness.

Wherever we encounter authentic models of sanctity we sense something of what George Fox had in mind when he wrote, “In every person there is something that is not of dust or earth or flesh or time, but of God.” There is no ready-to-hand, standardized version of the saint in our time, for the Christian life is shaped to the diverse contours of human individuality. We are not run off some divine assembly line. Yet in the spirituality of some persons we do perceive a distinctive flavor and a lively response to intimations from beyond. They have been sufficiently ordered, simplified, and gotten out of the way through an abandonment to the besieging love of God that the divine love and authority come to compelling expression in them. They cut through the lines of the sacred and the profane, of the personal and the social, and regard all life as sacramental and deal with it as

such. They seem to rise up from our flat levels of unaspiring respectability and reveal touches of grandeur, enthusiasm, and wonder. They possess an inner coherence and consistency and the quiet winsomeness suggested by Stanley's moving tribute to Livingstone: "He made me a Christian and never knew he was doing it."

In our own vernacular we speak of "Saint John" or "Saint Paul" or "Saint Francis," but the New Testament rarely, if ever, calls an individual person a saint. We do not come to sainthood in isolation. We have so individualized Christian experience that we have lost sight of the community of faith in which we are loved and nurtured into our most authentic being. William Willimon reminds us that we are not self-made people existing in isolation from the web of life, the events of the past, and the claims of others. Rather, he says, "you have a history that will take you the rest of time to unravel. You are what you are in great part because of the way you were conceived, nurtured, birthed, and loved by the household of faith."

The fact that we are a part of "the communion of saints" implies, further, that we cannot build great religion on personal experience and faith unrelated to the past. It is naive to assume that faith can be created anew without memory and without ties to those who have gone before us.

We live under the impetus of a cult of the contemporary, where we take our moral bearings from what is present and from what is immediately given. We live on a little narrow neck of land called the present and suffer from an uncritical presentism that is attuned primarily to those who happen to be walking the earth at the same time we are. A tragic dimension of contemporary life is its thinness and superficiality, which arises inevitably when we seek to build a society without fathers and mothers, with no parents but our peers and with a tragic disparagement of all that has come before us. Dean Inge once said, "If you marry the spirit of your generation, you will be a widow in the next." A prominent sociologist, Daniel Bell, calls for the acknowledgement of "the blessed who can bless" in a "laying on of hands in a continuity of generations."

Our fellowship together in Christ transcends the immediate, breaking through the boundaries of a particular congregation or denomination. We experience this reality when we worship with Christians in another land or

of a different language. The great German pastor, Helmut Thielicke, relates an event in his own life that illustrates this truth:

Once, kneeling in the prairie sand of South Africa, I celebrated the Lord's Supper with some tribesmen. They had never heard of our city in Germany, and I had known nothing of that remote bush country. Neither of us understood a single word of another's language. But when I made the sign of the cross with my hand and pronounced the name Jesus their dark faces would light up. We ate the same bread and drank from the same chalice, despite apartheid, and they couldn't do enough to show me their love. They held out their children to me and took me into their poor huts. We had never seen each other before. We were separated by social, geographical, and cultural barriers. And yet we were enclosed by arms that were not of this world. I understood the miracle of church.

Truly our Christian life is lived under vast horizons. We are heirs of truth that has come to us from many a land and from every age, and we are numbered in the glorious company of a world fellowship.

It is appropriate on the Festival of All Saints to remember those whose labors have ended. Jesus once reminded his disciples, "Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor" (Jn. 4:38). We enter into the *labors* of others, not their results, for the time of reaping is yet far off. We always enter into the labors of others. We warm by fires we have not kindled; we live by liberties we have not won; we are protected by institutions we did not establish. We never live to ourselves; all the past has invested in us. Moreover, we are cheered and fortified by our departed ones who demonstrated in life both the courage to do and the grace to endure. They have left us both a memory and a learning. Emily Dickinson reminds us:

By a departing light

We see acuter quite

Than by a wick that stays. There's something in the flight That clarifies the sight

And decks the rays.

Truly, nothing done in love ever dies entirely, for “as God lives, what is excellent is permanent.”

In Henri Nouwen’s Latin American journal entitled *Gracias*, which recounts his six months stay in Bolivia and Peru, he describes a service of celebration in the parish church at Cala Cala where sisters and priests from the United States came together with their Bolivian and American friends to commemorate the first anniversary of the four American churchwomen who were murdered in El Salvador. Nouwen describes the scene:

For me, the most moving part of the service was the reading of the martyrology by Father Jon Sobrino, one of the leading theologians in Latin America. He lives in El Salvador and is deeply involved in the struggle of the Church there. With restraint he called out the names of the men and women who have been murdered in Latin America during the last decade. As he let the years pass in front of our minds the number of martyrs increased. And every time he finished the list of victims of one particular year all the people in the church responded with a loud “*Presente.*” Yes, indeed, those who had given their lives for the liberation of the poor were still present in the minds and hearts of the people they came to serve.

We are bound by invisible ties to multitudes who have preceded us and into whose labors we have entered, the very names of whom would evoke the heart’s glad response, “*Presente.*” They are everlastingly present!

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that “we are encompassed about with a great cloud of witnesses.” In the eleventh chapter of that letter he rises to a mounting crescendo as he recounts the mighty deeds of heroes and heroines of faith (“of whom the world was not worthy,” he reminds us). Then in a stirring summation the chapter concludes: “And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” (Heb. 11:39–40). Their completion depends upon us; their perfection waits on our fidelity. In “the communion of saints” we have a charge to keep.