

All Saints Sunday Qualifying for Sainthood

What is a saint and why would any want to be one? The refrain from the old hymn, “When the Saints Go Marching In,” says, “Lord I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in!” The words “saint, saintly and sainthood” are commonly used to describe special people.

The word “saint” is defined as a “holy person, a faithful Christian, one who shares life in Christ.” There are good reasons we would not want to be identified with the title “Saint” or have it in front of our names. If the taking on of a new name was a part of our baptism one might think it would alter the way we live. Some denominations require that a new name be taken at confirmation. Of course taking on a new name and living into a famous saint’s life are very different things.

In some Christian denominations a saint is a term for someone who is formally recognized as holy by church authority. A process called “canonization” is used to determine those in that saintly number. Mother Theresa and John Paul II are examples of what many call modern saints. One of my favorite saint legends tells of Joseph of Cupertino, Italy, a Franciscan monk who lived in the 17th century. Joseph’s life became a series of visions and ecstasies, which could be triggered any time or place by the sound of a church bell, church music, the mention of the name of God or of the Blessed Virgin or of a saint, any event in the life of Christ, the sacred Passion, a holy picture, the thought of the glory in heaven, etc. Yelling, beating, pinching, burning, piercing with needles - none of this would bring him from his trances, but he would return to the world on hearing the voice of his superior in the order. He would often levitate and float (which led to his patronage of people involved in air travel), and could hear heavenly music.

Even in the 17th century, there was interest in the unusual, and Joseph's ecstasies in public caused both admiration and disturbance in the community. For 35 years he was not allowed to attend choir, go to the common refectory, walk in procession, or say Mass in church. To prevent making a spectacle, he was ordered to remain in his room with a private chapel. Sainthood is a matter of separating folklore from fact, legends from true miracles. There are over 10,000 saints

so named in Orthodox and Roman Catholic sources that have passed their churches' rigorous qualifications.

Can anyone be a saint? In the New Testament the term "saint" is applied to all faithful Christians (see Acts 9:32, 26:10). Paul addressed his letters to the "saints" when he wrote the churches.

By the year 100 A.D., Christians were honoring other Christians who had died, and asking for their intercession. Many people think that honoring saints was something the Church set up later, but it was part of Christianity from the very beginning. This practice came from a long-standing tradition in the Jewish faith of honoring prophets and holy people with shrines.

The first to receive special recognition in the church were martyrs, people who had given up their lives for the Faith during the persecution of Christians. These are the heroes of the church and they are examples to us today of holy living. Before the process of canonizing took place in the 12th century, public acclaim gave special saints notoriety.

Public approval in the ears of the clergy brought honor to the lives of exceptional Christians not as fervent as martyrs. In this way members named as exceptional saints were added to the ever growing list which gave All Saints Day its birth in the ninth century.

Is keeping statues or pictures of saints idolatry? You can look and see that our place of worship has statues, icons or pictures of Christ and other images. The most notable figure is that of St. Mary with the infant Jesus where candles may be lit and prayers be said. The intercession of the saints is not taught by the Episcopal Church or any members of the Anglican Communion. Yet, you can be sure that where ever there are two Episcopalians who do not pray with the saints there will be a third whose practice it is to ask them for help in time of need.

Look at the pictures of your loved ones in your wallet or around your home or office. Why do you keep these particular pictures? You might answer that you carry those pictures to remind you of people you love, to help you feel that they're close to you when you're not together, or to share with people you meet. But you probably didn't say you worshipped them.

Those are some of the same reasons we have statues and pictures of saints. Seeing a statue of Mary with the baby Jesus might

make us feel less alone when we are grieving. A picture of Saint Francis of Assisi might remind us of how much he loved God's creation and make us more aware of our environment.

While we will not find any references in scripture to seeking help from apostles, martyrs and exceptional Christians long dead, the historical Church has long taught that all saints are knit together in communion and fellowship in the body of Christ. Just as infant and child baptism is not taught in scripture yet the early church from the beginning saw that Christ's life must be brought into the whole human family from the beginning.

Why would we pray to saints when we have God and Jesus to pray to? First let me say that we pray **with** saints, not to them. Have you ever asked anyone to pray for you when you were having a hard time? Why did you choose to ask that person? You may have chosen someone you could trust, or someone who understood your problem, or someone who was close to God. Those are all reasons we ask saints to pray for us and with us in times of trouble.

When we say "I believe in the 'communion of saints'" in the apostles creed we say it as an act of faith that death does not separate us from the love of God. In Christ we believe as Christians that the wall between the living and the dead has been torn down just as the wall between Jews and Gentiles was torn down on Good Friday. In Jesus we are in union with the faithful past, present and future.

Are you a saint? Anyone who dares to share in Christ's life is a saint. Halos excluded, titles granted by church authority notwithstanding, the mark of the true saint is a life lived with Christ. And that behavior is mapped out completely in the teaching of Jesus' golden rule and in the beatitudes he taught in the Sermon on the Mount. St. Luke's version of the beatitudes are condensed, down to earth and given with clear markers of a saintly life: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless instead of curse, pray for your abusers and go the extra mile of mercy expecting nothing in return. Do this and we qualify to be children of the Most High. There is a story about a man who had a huge boulder in his front yard. He grew weary of this big, unattractive stone in the center of his lawn, so he decided to take advantage of it and turn it into an object of art. He

went to work on it with hammer and chisel, and chipped away at the huge boulder until it became a beautiful stone elephant. When he finished, it was gorgeous, breath-taking.

A neighbor asked, "How did you ever carve such a marvelous likeness of an elephant?"

The man answered, "I just chipped away everything that didn't look like an elephant!"

If you have anything in your life right now that doesn't look like love, then, with the help of God, chip it away! If you have anything in your life that doesn't look like compassion or mercy or empathy, then, with the help of God, chip it away! If you have hatred or prejudice or vengeance or envy in your heart, for God's sake, and the for the other person's sake, and for your sake, get rid of it! Let God chip everything out of your life that doesn't look like sainthood.

That fellow Christian is the yellow brick road to sainthood we celebrate on All Saints Day. It is the road less traveled. Take heart and rejoice because ordinary people who knew what it is to be human have qualified, received their certificates of warranty and have made it all the way to the Most High God. AMEN