



The Saints of Now and Then

For those who follow politics, in the hope that our politics leads somewhere, today is Election eve, the day before we get to choose between misfortune and catastrophe, each represented by one of our two major parties. But for many Christians in America and other parts of the world, November 1 of every year is All Saints Day, a time to remember and honor holy men and women for the remarkable contributions they made to the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth before finding its glory in the hereafter.



There are literally thousands whom the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox churches honor as saints in Heaven, so biographies and hagiographies make up a formidable part of church literature. Some, who were kings, emperors and popes, noted philosophers, philanthropists, and statesmen of various rank, have had a sizable impact on secular, as well as religious, history. But the company of canonized saints includes the small and seemingly insignificant as well as the great and powerful.

Clare Boothe Luce, an accomplished playwright, ambassador and congresswoman from Connecticut, published in 1952 a collection of 20 essays and one poem about a variety of saints, called *Saints for Now*. Luce, who edited and wrote an introduction to the book, noted that saints have been drawn from every walk and condition of life. Indeed, her description of the worldwide recruitment of men and women set apart for service to His kingdom makes clear that God is the ultimate equal-opportunity employer.

“He recruits his elect from men and women of every temperament and talent, every color, profession, class and condition on earth. The vast calendar of saints includes kings and queens like Edward the Confessor, Louis of France,” and other memorable monarchs. But it also includes, Luce noted, “saints who are shoddy, poor or humble like Joseph of Cupertino, John Bosco and Mother Cabrini. There are saints of giant intellect like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Bellarmine and Dominic; and there are saints like Patrick who said of himself ‘I have not studied as others.. I am the most illiterate and the least of all the faithful.’ ” Saint Joseph of Cupertino, who lived and died long before the Wright brothers, is honored by the Catholic Church as the patron saint of aviation, apparently because of his miraculous flight to the church rafters — a flight Mrs. Luce described, none too charitably, as one that “seemed all but a manifestation of his want of mental substance.”

We, in our post-modern world, tend to find the saints of old strange, as they would no doubt find us. We



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 1, 2010

are prone to have in mind those immobile figures of plastic or plaster, who appear to have spent life on Earth as we imagine them in Eternity, looking down with eyes half closed and hands perpetually folded in for prayer, save perhaps for an occasional break to shine those halos that hang close overhead. Yet many of these warriors and peacemakers, noblemen and beggars, poets and pilgrims, Luce pointed out, went on “terrible or glittering adventures” that make old fairy tales and new novels pale by comparison.

“The fisherman Peter drops his nets to become the head of an organization that has endured for 2000 years. The maiden Joan drops her spindle to become a great warrior and a king-maker; the soldier Ignatius drops his sword to seize a pilgrim’s staff; the nobleman Francis of Assisi drops his dagger to pick up a beggar’s bowl and walks to Jerusalem unarmed through the lines of contending armies; the princess Hilda becomes a nun; the nun Catherine of Siena becomes a stateswoman.”

Where did we ever get the idea that saints were dull? How did we come to think of them as joyless, when the Apostle Paul repeatedly rejoiced in his sufferings for Christ and, from a prison cell, encouraged the saints of his day to, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice.” Saint Peter, who was also beaten and imprisoned for spreading the gospel spoke of rejoicing “with joy unspeakable.”

Some of the saints of the Middle Ages who were known for a severe asceticism replete with hair shirts and self-flagellation, might seem fanatical to us. And some of their practices no doubt were extreme, even for their time. But they might wonder at the dedication and zeal of those in our time who sleep all night on cold sidewalks to be first in line for tickets to a rock concert, or who forsake the comforts of hearth and home to stand shivering for hours in freezing rain or icy wind in sub-zero temperatures to root on a favorite football team. The saints of old had a different goal line in mind.

There is a wonder to the “communion of saints,” and a thrill even in knowing what we don’t know. It is not ours to know who among the saints we travel with in our journey of faith on Earth are destined to be among the capital “S” saints in heaven. Some may look to all the world like failures, though few will appear as hopelessly defeated as Christ did on the cross. Our own journey to death and resurrection is made less burdensome by knowing that our prayers are joined by those of the countless saints, known and unknown to us, in the company of Christ in Heaven. And our failures weigh us down a little less when we remember a few wise words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta: “We are called upon not to be successful, but to be faithful.”



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