

All Saints' Day

Sunday Said Mass at the High Altar

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

Ecclesiasticus 44:1–10, 13–14; Psalm 149;

Revelation 7:2–4, 9–17; Matthew 5:1–12

In 1904, the American industrialist and philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie, created the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, whose mission is “to recognize and support those who perform acts of heroism in civilian life in the United States and Canada.” The 1905 class of heroes consisted of three young people, all of whom had risked their lives to save others from drowning. The class of 2020 included a seventeen-year-old boy, who scaled a thirty-foot rock wall, without climbing gear, to reach and rescue a badly injured woman. This year’s class also honored an eighty-six-year old woman, who died of injuries suffered while fending off an attacker who had assaulted a friend.¹

It is moving to read the stories of these men and women, who acted quickly and decisively to save another’s life while risking their own. They are models of courage. Aristotle would have admired them, and Thomas Aquinas would have, too. They inspire admiration, and their stories often move one to ask, “What would I have done if I had been there that day?”

¹ www.carnegiehero.org. Accessed 10/30/2020

Each of these heroes, or their families, receive a medal, made these days of bronze. Andrew Carnegie's profile is displayed on the medal's front. Etched on the back are the names of the rescuer, the rescued, and the date of the event. Finally, stamped around the medal's edge are these words: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).²

The use of Jesus words is striking because Carnegie's philanthropy seems quite secular. Religious faith need not motivate these courageous acts. The Commission is raising up heroes, not canonizing saints. Notably, the Commission's website applauds "The Power of One" and pays "Tribute to the Power of the Individual."³

We come here today to do something rather different. Though it is true that the COVID-19 epidemic has isolated us and separated us one from another, nonetheless we come here this morning, both virtually and in person, not just as individuals, but as a community. The collect of the day suggests that we have been "knit together in one communion and fellowship" in Christ's mystical body, and that body *includes the saints*. We are part of them and they of us.

² *Ibid.*

³ <https://www.carnegiehero.org/resources/power-of-one-hero-fund-awards-10000th-carnegie-medal/>

We can admire them, but we are also meant to imitate them, and by so doing we also hope to join them. It is as if, on this day, we are called to acknowledge the invisible, but very real, path that unites heaven and earth. We remember the saints. The saints intercede for us and they join us as we worship. And, so, although the saints are almost always courageous, they are something other than heroes.

Therefore, what is a saint?

William of Auxerre, a thirteenth-century theologian, is helpful here, since he has provided us, good scholastic that he is, with seven reasons why “the church celebrates the feasts of the saints” (Barrett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 113). He writes: First, we celebrate their feasts, because they celebrate feasts for us; for there is joy in heaven among the angels of God and the holy souls over one sinner who repents. Second, so that we should have them as intercessors; Third, to imitate them. Fourth, to give us hope—if they can be raised so high because of their righteous deeds, so can we. Fifth, so that seeing their beauty and purity, we might be ashamed of our sins; Sixth, because their feast is ours. (And here William anticipates our collect. He imagines that knitting together of which the collect speaks, recalling Saint Paul’s words, “For all things are yours, whether . . . the

world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor 3:21–23). Then, finally, William concludes with the great paradox that undergirds the meaning of our celebration today. By honoring the saints, he says, “we honor God alone.”

William of Auxerre is not being innovative here. His list has been shaped by centuries’ worth of Christian worship, prayer, and practice. Here in the thirteenth century, saints are not what they were for Saint Paul, namely the living, baptized members of Paul’s communities. By the thirteenth century, they were something else. First, they were models because they were remarkable. They had done the righteous deeds that we hear about in our first reading.

But for William, and for the tradition upon which he draws, the saints are not just models. The saints are *powerful*. They have died, but now live in the presence of God. They *intercede* for us; and this understanding is fueled by texts like today’s reading from Revelation. That passage paints a vivid picture of the martyr-saints, those who have gone through the great tribulation, who have died but now live. The saints are powerful because they have won the victory and now stand before the very throne of God, the one who both inspired and enabled their victory. To read Revelation

is to see that the saint is glorious not just because of her courage nor even because of her righteousness. Her sanctity is fueled by the grace of God, who stands with the saint in times of crisis. The saint's glory is always a reflected glory: and because of this, the saint is never just an exemplary individual, though they are often that. The saint is a bridge, always a bridge that links heaven and earth.

And if that is true, then people of faith are necessarily implicated in the lives and the power of the saints. The saints were created in the image of God, and so were we. The saints hoped to become “participants of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) and, on our good days, so do we.

In an e-mail that Bishop Mary Glasspool sent to the clergy of the diocese this week, she reflected on the art and architecture of the Roman Catholic cathedral in Los Angeles. She wrote, “The feature that [really] wins my heart in that magnificent [building] is the series of tapestries which adorn the walls of the . . . nave. The tapestries . . . are known as the *Communion of Saints*. Twenty-five fresco-like tapestries depict 135 saints from around the world, including holy men and women of North America canonized by the Church. Twelve untitled figures, including children of all ages, represent the many anonymous holy people in our midst. All the

figures are gazing toward the light of the great Cross-window above the Altar And if you ever have the occasion to visit or participate in a worship service there, you may experience the wonderful sense that you are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses journeying right along with you toward the eternal Reign of God.”

I loved that image because it helps me to understand the significance of the saints in my own life. But I confess that Bishop Mary’s words also present me with a kind of challenge. Here at Saint Mary’s we are surrounded by the saints in wood and glass and paint, but, most important, in spirit. To be sure, the saints are, fallible, not perfect, and so they remind us of our own struggles to be truly human, participants in the divine nature.

On Tuesday and in the days that follow, may the saints inspire us. May they intercede for us, and may their prayers serve to keep us on the path to which Jesus calls us. May they help us to thirst for righteousness, to turn away from arrogance and to surrender our thirst for power. May they help us to care for the poor and to love mercy more than vengeance. May they show us in this angry and violent time the way of peace. And by the grace of God may we be peacemakers, all of us children of God.

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