

MUSINGS

FROM THE

EDITOR



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In the fall semester of 2002, I found myself questioning for the first time the veracity of the Christian narrative. Studying abroad in London, I was immersed in a post-Christian ecology, one in which the naïveté of Christianity’s claims regarding God and human life were treated as a self-evident fact. In place of the rich milieu of faith present at Notre Dame, I often worshipped in parish churches where religion functioned more as duty than delight. I discovered a richer possibility of human flourishing in the poetry of Shakespeare, Rilke, and Wordsworth—an inchoate turn toward an existential humanism that I felt was more “sophisticated” than what seemed like the naïve truth claims of God’s enfleshment among us. I participated in a deconstructed form of Ignatian discernment, living as if God did not exist (ironically organizing the liturgical life of the students of Notre Dame also studying abroad at the time). I was on my way out of the Church.

Despite every attempt to leave the Church during this period of time (and indeed I worked hard at doing so both intellectually and morally), something continued to hold me back from my planned departure. It was the feast days of the saints. I wanted to perceive Christianity as nothing more than a psychological construction, an impoverished form of humanism that did not go far enough. I wanted to reduce the Incarnation to ideas regarding the general sacramentality of existence, the Eucharist to a ritual of fraternal communion. Yet, the saints functioned as impenetrable obstacles to my own intellectual and moral pride. In an internal dialogue taking place on the South Bank of London, I would raise substantive objections to Christianity’s truth claims. In return, my mind would turn to the stories of these very real women and men, who embodied in space and time the claim that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. These saints were real women and men, who gave their entire humanity over to the story of divine love revealed in Jesus Christ. These holy men and women were not psychological constructions but historically embodied icons of what human life could become in Jesus Christ.

I wanted to leave the Church but was held back by the constant remembering of these men and women, who continued to produce within me a bewildered wonderment.

- Mary, the Mother of God, who gave the entirety of her humanity as gift to the Father, a kenotic self-emptying that created a space for the Word to dwell.
- Augustine, the saint whose intellect was unmatched, yet who sought nothing more than the powerlessness of divine praise.
- Ephrem the Syrian, whose poetic prowess was transfigured in giving it over to remembering the life of Christ.
- An array of martyrs, those who gave their lives out of divine love, demonstrating to the world that the economy of love operates outside of the spheres right and wrong.

The saints functioned for me as that great “perhaps” addressed by Joseph Ratzinger in his *Introduction to Christianity*: “however strongly unbelief may feel justified thereby, it cannot forget the eerie feeling induced by the words, ‘Yet perhaps it is true.’ That ‘perhaps’ is the unavoidable temptation it cannot elude, the temptation in which it, too, in the very act of rejection, has to experience the unrejectability of belief.”¹ No matter how much modern culture seeks to deconstruct religious practice, the saints are flesh and blood figures, who sing out to us a chorus of “perhapses.” A song of praise that renews our imagination, not only opening us to the possibility of God’s existence, but wooing us to see with a heart wounded by love what it means for our humanity to become divine.

This edition of *Church Life* turns its attention to the role of saints in the New Evangelization. A number of the essays collected in this volume, including those by Ann Astell, Keith Egan, and Cyril O’Regan, were first given during the Institute for Church Life’s lecture series “Saturdays with the Saints.” Each football season since 2011, campus visitors and students alike gather in the basement of Geddes Hall to hear about the bewildering sanctity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and John Henry Newman, of Edith Stein and Hildegard of Bingen, of unnamed martyrs and holy men and women. The event has proved popular, as our director John Cavadini notes, because the saints provide an infinite fund for the Christian imagination. The saints attract not only the super-religious, those who are engaged in frequent religious practice, but the entire human family—those who cannot help but be enticed by the art of sanctified living. The saints manifest to the world the reality that Christian faith is not the sublimation of what makes us most human but is instead an elevation and transfiguration of human life. Marriage

and childbearing, suffering and pain, scholarship and service—all of this is material for God to transform into holiness.

The saints, thus, enable the Gospel to cease functioning as a series of abstract principles and instead become grounded in a historical narrative, a beautiful community of faith that pilgrims through history. Pope Francis himself comments on this pedagogy of the saints in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:

Realities are greater than ideas. This principle has to do with incarnation of the word and its being put into practice: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is from God” (1 Jn 4:2). The principle of reality, of a word already made flesh and constantly striving to take flesh anew, is essential to evangelization. It helps us to see that the Church’s history is a history of salvation, to be mindful of those saints who inculturated the Gospel in the life of our peoples and to reap the fruits of the Church’s rich bimillennial tradition, without pretending to come up with a system of thought detached from this treasury, as if we wanted to reinvent the Gospel. (§233)

In this way, the saints interrupt those Catholic evangelizers who seek to treat the New Evangelization as an occasion to move beyond “cultural Catholicism.” Our celebration of saints’ feast days serves as a constant reminder that the Church’s proclamation is necessarily grounded in the specificity of culture. The pilgrimages and gaudy statues and festivals that unfold in city streets and rural towns—all of these are proclamations of the Gospel that are part of the renewal of the world. To dismiss cultural Catholicism and popular religiosity wholesale is to disincarnate Christian faith, de-humanizing the Christian narrative in the process.

As the Solemnity of All Saints makes clear, we discern in the saints a glorious community of praise (one in which envy has no place). We are given a glimpse of what we the human family are to become, if we allow ourselves to be glorified by God's love:

For today by your gift we celebrate the festival of your city, the heavenly Jerusalem, our mother, where the great array of our brothers and sisters already gives you eternal praise. Towards her, we eagerly hasten as pilgrims advancing by faith, rejoicing in the glory bestowed upon those exalted members of the Church through whom you give us, in our frailty, both strength and good example.²

For in the end, the blessed saints are those who have taken quite seriously the claim that God is love. They are the ones who adore the Lamb before the throne, their whole identity becoming Eucharistic. Christina Rossetti, the nineteenth-century Anglican poet, addresses the Eucharistic and eschatological nature of all the saints:

As grains of sand, as stars, as drops of dew,
 Numbered and treasured by the Almighty Hand,
 The Saints triumphant throng that holy land
 Where all things and Jerusalem are new.
 We know not half they sing or half they do,
 But this we know, they rest and understand;
 While like a conflagration freshly fanned
 Their love glows upward, outward, thro' and thro'.
 Lo! Like a stream of incense launched on flame
 Fresh Saints stream up from death to life above,
 To shine among those others and rejoice:
 What matters tribulation whence they came?
 All love and only love can find a voice
 Where God makes glad His Saints, for God is Love.³

The saints are integral to the New Evangelization precisely because they are the ones who form our imagination to know what Christian love looks like when it takes flesh in time and space. They teach us gratitude, a way of reading our lives as participating in the narrative of salvation history. They, in total love, intercede before the throne of the Lamb, desiring with all their hearts that every human being might join them in their eternal doxological chorus. To contemplate the memory of the saints in liturgical prayer, in art, in music, in architecture, and in devotional prayer—it is to enter into the fire of divine love, to practice our vocation to sanctity. To learn what it means to say that God is love.



NOTES

- 1 Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 46.
- 2 Eucharistic Preface, Solemnity of All Saints, Roman Missal.
- 3 Christina Rossetti, "All Saints," in *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 453.