

ALL SAINTS

A French writer of the 20th century, Leon Bloy, once wrote: “The only real sadness, the only real failure, the only *great tragedy* in life, is not to become a saint.” A recognition of the truth of that statement was very likely part of the reason why the Church celebrates each year today’s feast of All Saints, honoring all those men and women, canonized or not, who avoided that tragedy or who, in more positive terms, made a success of their lives, even if from purely worldly standards they seemed to be failures, as indeed many considered Jesus a failure as he hung dying on the cross. I think it is also at least a faint recognition of the truth of Bloy’s statement that was in the background of our very presence here this morning—in other words, we want to be in touch, literally in touch, with the sacramental body and blood of Christ so as to be nourished and strengthened in the call to holiness that each of us once received at the time of our baptism.

But if sanctity is what all of us should rightly want, it is also worth noting that the very notion of sanctity has changed somewhat over the centuries. To go back to the beginning of Christianity, note how St. Paul regularly addresses the recipients of his letters as “the saints, the holy ones, *hoi hagioi*.” We don’t normally address one another in such terms today, and one reason for the change was pointed out some decades ago by a great Catholic writer, Romano Guardini, in a beautiful little book titled *The Saints in Daily Christian Life*. He notes that when Paul was writing his letters, to become a Christian was to make a momentous decision, often placing a person at odds with members of his or her own family, not to mention arousing suspicion and even hatred by the leaders of the Roman empire. At Mass two Thursdays ago we heard from the twelfth chapter of Luke’s Gospel Jesus’ words about causing division: “From now on a household of five will be divided against itself, three against two and two against three,” father against son, mother against daughter, and so forth. In other words, in those days it

took a lot of courage to enter the community of Jesus' followers, so it was natural enough for St. Paul to address those who had made that decision as "saints, holy ones."

But when Christianity not only became permitted but was even made the state religion, the situation changed dramatically. Becoming a Christian could now be a way of social advancement, better employment, prestige, and with that change there came about a corresponding change in the very language of sanctity and sainthood. Now the holy ones were not the Christians *en masse*, but rather those who had taken special steps to set themselves apart from the common herd, people like Anthony of Egypt, who literally went out from the towns and cities to live much of his life in the seclusion of the desert. Even more strikingly were those who became martyrs, not in the broad sense of "witnessing" to Christ but in the narrow sense of witnessing by the very shedding of their blood. And so, down the centuries, for the most part those whom the Church honored as saints were those who really stood out: no longer just the "red martyrs," but also those who dedicated their whole life to pondering the word of God and preaching or teaching it to others—like Augustine of Hippo or Thomas Aquinas or our own patron, Anselm of Canterbury. Still others made the huge sacrifice of leaving their native land to bring the Gospel to faraway lands—Patrick to Ireland, Boniface to the German-speaking lands of Europe, Francis Xavier to India and Japan. Others stood out for their truly heroic efforts to care for the poor, like Elizabeth of Hungary or Mother Cabrini or Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, who will surely be canonized before much longer. I think there is no doubt that when most of us were first learning something about Catholicism, these are the kinds of people we thought of when we heard the word "saint."

That is still in many respects the case today. When Pope Francis was in Washington about six weeks ago, he canonized a man, Junipero Serra, whose prodigious labors in founding

missions all along the coast of California far exceeded anything any of us will ever do.

However, it is also surely true that Romano Guardini was correct when he claimed in that little book that the very notion of saint has changed rather significantly in recent times. Taking his cue from what a still earlier writer meant by “the sacrament of the present moment,” Guardini wrote that sanctity in our time “is less and less an obvious thing,” for *what* a truly holy person does “is no longer of ultimate importance, be it great, difficult, or dangerous—these things do not finally matter.” What does matter is that “it is a person who acts with God, and for God. There is nothing to call attention to the person. We might even work beside such a person, walk with him, and note nothing special. But someone whose spirit is attuned to see these things will notice a quiet freedom, a calm assurance, a spirit of love and orientation to the divine, a heart that remains joyous and glad in all cares and trials.”

Hearing that, you may well—and correctly—think of a saint like Thérèse of Lisieux, who (as I have said on other occasions) made so little impression on some of her fellow Carmelites that when she lay dying, she overheard two of them wondering about what they could possibly say about her on the obituary notices they would soon be sending to other Carmels—and yet this was a woman who with good reason has become one of the most beloved saints in the history of the Church. But rather than say more about her, it might be more to the point to talk about two persons whom Pope Francis canonized even more recently than Junipero Serra, namely, Thérèse’s own parents, Louis and Zélie Martin. Although people who lived and worked with them surely considered them rather exemplary Catholics, I expect very few of their acquaintances ever put them into the category of sainthood. In fact, one of the really interesting things about the many letters of Zélie that have been preserved is how down-to-earth they are. To be sure—and as you would expect—there are abundant passages in which, for example, she

urges her brother to be more mindful of the things of God, but there are all sorts of other statements that have no religious connotation whatever and some that are not even particularly exemplary. Here are just a few snippets from some of them, all of them written to her brother living some miles away:

We sometimes think of “saints” as persons who never in any way flaunt their talents, but not Zélie. In one letter she writes: “I don’t have enough time to write longer; besides, the more I say to you, the more you will tease me about my style.... I did, however, win first prize in style in the past [when I was at school]. Out of eleven compositions, I won first prize then times, and then I was in the first division [at that school].”

In other letters, she refers to the way she and her brother would often argue with each other, and to the way he doesn’t compliment her for her efforts in staying in touch with him: “Come [visit us] soon if you can. We’ll have a good time together. We’ll argue a little, as we always do, that that will be a diversion. It’s a little way to pass the time.... I would have written to you [sooner], but you see, I wasn’t very happy. You had not said one word to me about my earlier letter, me, who stayed up so late to write it and was so tired.”

Or again, we tend to think of the saints as those who have no fear of death, seeing it only as the gateway to a better life. Not Zélie. She tells her brother: “I confess, death terrifies me. I just came from [the wake] seeing my [deceased] father-in-law. His arms are so still and his face so cold. And to think that I will see my family like that or that they will see me.... You may be accustomed to seeing death, [but as] for me, I had never seen it so close.”

There is no need to refer to still more passages. My main point is that we should not put the saints up on some lofty pedestal thinking that there’s one group of people who do and say everything in a totally exemplary way and then there’s the rest of us down below, admiring them

from a distance. No, even those we recognize with the official honors of canonization were in many respects often quite down-to-earth in their words and feelings. The main thing is that they nevertheless had their sights fixed ultimately on the one thing—or better, the one Person—who really matters, and that it was ultimately in God that they put their trust. As we honor all of them on this great feast, may our participation in this Eucharist keep us as well on the way that leads to the kingdom.