

Although it is one of the days designated for celebration on the calendar of the Christian year, the holiday of All Saints is often overlooked. Within the Roman Catholic and Episcopal traditions, some 140 saints are honored every year, with special days set aside to remember St. Cornelius, or St. Lucy, or St. Sebastian, and St. Stephen, and a host of others, some with names we have heard, most we probably know nothing about.

In many Protestant churches, it is traditional on All Saints day to read the names of church members who have died during the past year, people we might call ORDINARY SAINTS. WITH THEIR VERY LIVES they have shown us something of God's face, something of God's way. All Saints Day, then, becomes a family reunion of sorts — a reminder that not even death can separate us from one another. And contained within the celebration of this day is the challenge to continue what they began; we must *“pick up where they left off.”*

Originally, ALL SAINTS was not a Christian holiday. It began in the British Isles, long before the birth of Christ, as a Celtic festival of the dead. The Celts' new year began November 1, which was the beginning of winter for them. They believed that the souls of those who had died during the year traveled to the other world on that day, and they honored their dead with a great festival. Animals were sacrificed, fruits and grain were offered, and bonfires were lit to help the dead find their way on their journey to the other world.

Eventually, when Christian missionaries arrived to convert the Celts, they tried to convert their pagan festivals as well, and that pagan festival of the dead became All Saints Day, a feast day in honor of every Christian saint. But this change was not totally successful.

The Celts merely went underground, continuing to celebrate their new year the evening before All Saints' on All Hollow's Eve, which has come down to us as Halloween. Our traditions of ghostly costumes, jack-o-lanterns, and trick-or-treating can all be directly traced to that ancient pagan festival of the dead.

There is one thing both of these celebrations have in common, however, and that is OUR NEED TO REMEMBER THOSE WHO HAVE DIED, to remember their love and faith, to remember their commitment, to remember their perseverance. It is a day when we rise up and call them blessed.

In our scripture lesson today, the writer of Hebrews was talking about saints when he wrote in chapter 12:

*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.”*

As difficult as our Christian race sometimes is, isn't it encouraging to know that there is a great *“crowd of witnesses”* who is cheering us on toward the finish line? They have run their race, they know that it is possible to cross the finish line. And it just might be the courage of a faithful saint that can give us the courage to finish our race.

When you hear the word SAINT, what do you think of? You may think of someone who has an extraordinary piety, or who has died a martyr's death for their faith, or someone who has performed miracles. When we think of saints, we tend to think of them in stained-glass images instead of being flesh and blood people like us. But as Paul used and understood the word *“saint,”* he had in mind that there is really ONLY ONE THING THAT MAKES US A SAINT and that is a love for God, a love that demonstrates itself in a love for

others. It is LOVE that separates the saints from those who are not.

The eleventh chapter of the book of Hebrews has been called the "*Hall of Fame of the Faithful*," or the "*Honor Roll of the Saints*." We read there of many great heroes, and, as someone suggested, "sheroes" of the faith; Abel and Noah; Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Jacob and Moses; Rahab and Gideon and Samson. WHO IS YOUR HERO IN THE FAITH? Who has touched your life, and loved you in the name of Christ? Who can you can point to and say, "*Because of them, my life has been changed!*" What is the common thread that binds their lives together with our life? It is their and our love of God, and their and our faithfulness to God. We are made kin by Christ's blood.

On this All Saints Sunday, we worship surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are here. Matthew is here, and Thomas and Barnabas and Paul, and Titus and Timothy. John and Charles Wesley are here, and John Calvin and Martin Luther, AND THOSE WHOM YOU HAVE LOVED AND LOST ARE HERE AS WELL. We who are saints on earth need to remember those who have gone before us. The courage of a grandmother may be just what gives us the courage to face our own challenges. The encouragement of a father may provide the push we need that brings us into the presence of Christ. The love of a spouse reminds us of how great God's love is for each of us. Because of these ordinary saints, we see what we see, and reach what we reach, because we are able to stand on their shoulders. Because of them, and because of the God who binds us all together, we can do more than any of us had dreamed to do alone.

And again, we don't merely celebrate the saints or remember them; we do not simply lean upon them for strength. Rather, we continue in the direction to which they have pointed us. WE ARE CHALLENGED TO LIVE A CHRISTIAN LIFE, AND NOT MERELY TO

OBSERVE A CHRISTIAN LIFE. As we think about those who have *“run with endurance the race that was set before them,”* as we think about those who have finished their race, perhaps we will not be able to run as rapidly or as effectively as they did, but run we must. In our span of life, with whatever calling and with whatever gifts we have been given, we run the race, not only from personal responsibility, but also we run because we know that there are persons WHO WILL FOLLOW US. When we complete our portion of the race, there is another generation to whom we will pass the torch of love and faithfulness. WE RUN BECAUSE WE MIGHT BE SOMEBODY’S HERO!