

YEAR OF FAITH 2012-2013

19th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME | August 11, 2013

It was a fiery accident on Interstate Route 195. Several cars collided. One of them was already on fire. A woman and a small child were trapped inside. Two other drivers, themselves uninjured, seeing the situation ran to the car on fire and somehow managed to get the woman and child out. After the police and emergency crews arrived and the injured were taken care of, including the woman and her child, their rescuers went on their way. By the evening news they were being hailed as heroes. Their reaction: They didn't see themselves as heroes; they were just ordinary people doing what they could to help.

That's how it seems with heroes of every time and place. They rarely ever think they've done anything unusual at the time they are doing it. Surely this is so of the great heroes of faith we read about in the Bible, like those mentioned in today's second reading, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; or like Moses who led the chosen people out of Egypt, as our first reading calls to mind.

Or like those who heard and answered the call of Jesus to be His followers. Today in the Gospel Jesus calls them to be like wise and watchful householders.

From the earliest days of the Church, those who imitated Jesus by dying for the faith were held in highest honor. Those who died a martyr's death in the Roman persecutions were called in Latin "Sancti," from which comes our word, "Saint." Their names lived on in word and song and art. Their stories in time wrote icons for heroic living in Christ.

Then came those who imitated Jesus in his holiness of living, his fasting in the desert, his intense prayer, his care for those in any distress. In many and varied ways they were wise and watchful householders of the faith. Likewise, they were honored and remembered after death as saints.

For centuries people were simply acclaimed saints: Those who knew them in life were so impressed with their goodness, the effectiveness of their influence for good, their courage in time of trial, their self-sacrifice for others, that they publicly honored their memory and sought their intercession in prayer. (Even in our times we may think of Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta or Blessed Pope John Paul II, whom millions have considered saints and honored them with memorials and prayers soon after they died.)

Eventually in our Catholic Church it fell to the Pope to declare certain people saints after a careful study of their lives and their writings, and seeking evidence of their intercession to obtain miraculous healings.

Of all these holy people, we Catholics believe that the Blessed Virgin Mary holds first place. She has the unique privilege of being the mother of Jesus who is Himself the Son of God incarnate. In anticipation of the merits of her Son's death and resurrection she was preserved from Original Sin and its effect from the moment of her conception. Because of God's grace at work in her and her special fidelity to her divine vocation Mary was never guilty of personal sin during her lifetime. At the end of her life, we Catholics believe, she was assumed body and soul into heaven.

It is true that in the Letters of Saint Paul the word “saint” applies to persons living in the present. Today we tend to think of saints only as those who have already passed beyond this life to be with the Lord in heaven forever.

Yet we begin our path to holiness by baptism, when the Holy Spirit comes to dwell with us. We are made holy by God even before we become saintly by our lives. If we complete our journey on earth so as to pass to eternal life with Christ we will have become saints in the fullest sense.

In our Profession of Faith we say we believe in the Communion of Saints. But this communion is not just the union of those already in glory in heaven. It includes those who have died but are in the midst of purification, as well as us here on earth on our pilgrimage to eternal life.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the Communion of Saints in these words: “When the Lord comes in glory, and all his angels with him, death will be no more and all things will be subject to him. But at the present time some of his disciples are pilgrims on earth. Others have died and are being purified, while still others are in glory, contemplating ‘in full light, God himself triune and one, exactly as he is.’ ... All of us who are of Christ and who have his Spirit form one Church and in Christ are joined together.” (CCC #954)

We Catholics are sometimes accused of worshipping saints – putting them in place of God – because we honor them with pictures and statues and prayers addressed to them. But if we think of the communion of saints as it really is, one family united in Christ, then it is appropriate to honor them as we do our earthly heroes, with pictures and other images. It is also appropriate to ask them to intercede for us from their place in heaven, as easily as we would ask anyone on earth to pray for us and with us. And it is appropriate to imitate their virtues. Since in their lives they imaged Christ, imitating their example helps us to live like Him.

We read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “Exactly as Christian communion among our fellow pilgrims brings us closer to Christ, so our communion with the saints joins us to Christ, from whom as from its fountain and head issues all grace, and the life of the People of God itself.” (CCC 957)

Here on earth we recognize that some people have special human power and influence. Our reaction to such earthly power often enough is either to try to use it for our benefit or to condemn it. How much more healthful and helpful spiritually it is for us to recognize that we have in Mary and the saints in heaven special friends and models of holy living.

Once more from the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “Being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven fix the whole Church more firmly in holiness.... So by their fraternal concern our weakness is greatly helped.” (CCC 956)

When all is said and done, we Catholics believe in a Communion of Saints that links the faithful of all time and every place to the salvation won for us in Jesus Christ. It is not just historical fact but an ever present reality that we have in Mary and the Saints our special friends and models, our “Heroes for all time.”