

**‘Surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses’ (Heb. 12:1-2; Eph. 5:8-14)**

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Like the psalmist, the Christian may cry out in a moment of despair, ‘How long, O Lord, will you forget me? How long will you hide your face? How long must I bear grief in my soul, this sorrow in my heart day and night?’ (Ps. 12 [13]:1-3). So many people feel like this. Many more this week as a result of a terrorist attack in Manchester. Families who have lost loved ones to an act of indiscriminate, brutal violence. How are we to make sense of this? The aching of a lonely heart, full of sorrow, seems to speak only of God’s absence. One of the hardest realities about Christian faith, which every believer must face at some time, is that it does not provide immunity to suffering. The Christian community is not a safe space in which believers hide from the world. Indeed, the final moments of Christ’s life – his Passion and Death – and his admonition, ‘If you would be my follower, take up your cross’ (Mt. 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23), show that Christian discipleship often entails greater and deeper suffering; and, yet. And, yet, our faith also makes despair intolerable.

St Francis of Assisi (c. 1181-1226) – that famous medieval lover of creation – is reputed to have said, ‘God is the sovereign Master, the Master of excellence. A melancholy and frowning face is out of place in His service.’ The challenge for Christians is to never lose heart. St Francis was wont to call God, ‘Master’, and we must put our trust in His universal mastery. Our words of lamentation, of anguish and isolation, which are naturally called forth by bad experiences, must, like those of the psalmist, be followed quickly by words of trust, ‘As for me, I trust in your merciful love. Let my heart rejoice in your saving help.’ (Ps. 12 [13]:6). Yes, ours is a

religion of the Cross, but it is more than that. Christianity is a religion of the Cross conquered; not a cult of death, but a religion of life. And it is to an abundance of life that we are called and to which the ‘great cloud of witnesses’ (Heb. 12:1) of the letter to the Hebrews – the Communion of the Saints, living and dead – directs us.<sup>1</sup> ‘I am the resurrection’, says the Lord, ‘If anyone believes in me, even though they die, they will live.’ (Jn. 11:25).

Saints’ lives are like stakes in the ground of salvation history, marking its progress from one generation to the next; the great walk of witness undertaken from age to age. To those stakes, we find that signs have been affixed, written in many colours and many hands, but always bearing the same message, ‘This way to the Lord; this way to your salvation’. It is, as the author of Hebrews has reminded us, through Him alone that we are saved. Everything else – all that was, all that is, and all that shall be – which tends towards salvation is but His instrument. The lives of the saints are no exception. In traditional parlance, they would be called ‘sacramentals of salvation’; in modern terms, they are ‘signposts to the Saviour’. Lampposts in the darkness of snow-covered Narnia, they illuminate the path to the one Lord who loves, redeems, restores, transforms, and saves. This is the one Lord of nothing less than the whole universe, but who desires nothing more than your friendship.

The saints are also *necessary* instruments. The examples of holy men and women are indispensable, because He has given them to us out of the abundance of His love. We do not need the saints in the sense that they do not save us; of course, only Christ does that,

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<sup>1</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 946-62.

through the working of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> But we do need them in the sense that He has given them to us as a gift – a free gift – to witness to His saving work. One account of the martyrdom of a saintly bishop in the second century, the age of Christian persecutions, declares, ‘We worship Christ as God’s Son; we love the martyrs as the Lord’s disciples and imitators, and rightly so because of their matchless devotion towards their king and master. May we also be their companions and fellow disciples!’<sup>3</sup> In the Communion of Christ’s saints – the mystical body of the church, living and dead – we need never feel alone, cut-off from the love of Christ, or unsure about how to put our trust in him at difficult times.

Then, of course, the saints witness to Christ in an almost infinite number of ways. You may have heard people refer to their patron saint (many colleges and halls of this university are named in honour of such a patron), and that is because there is a saint for every season. They are the brightest flowers in the garden of heaven, blossoming in divers colours and at different times, but all bearing the same witness to the care of the gardener.<sup>4</sup> There is a saint for every occupation under heaven: for conceiving and giving birth, for being young, for studying, for teaching, for law-making, for cooking, for pilgrimage and even for hopeless causes. The wise author of the book of Ecclesiastes reminds us of our finitude and smallness when he says that God, ‘has made everything suitable for its time...they cannot find out what He has done from the beginning to the end.’ (Ecc. 3:11). In a special way, this lesson holds true of the saints. They witness to and in infinite variety (see Eph. 3:10), for

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism*, 1987ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 17; see *Catechism*, 957.

<sup>4</sup> See Benedict XVI, ‘The Garden of the Saints’, in *Holiness is Always in Season* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), pp. 13-15.

their times and according to God’s purposes, recognising that they – like all human beings – were made in His image and, by the help of His grace, they reveal that image in their lives. Through the saints, the radiant beauty of the being of God breaks into the world, for the sake of its conversion. Just for a moment and never in its fullness – that would be too much – the infinite, incomprehensible and ineffable glory of God may be glimpsed through the lens of the saint’s life.

They reveal, too, that holiness consists, first, in recognising and seeking to restore the indestructible image of God in ourselves. As one great medieval saint wrote, ‘We have seen how every soul – even if burdened with sin [2 Tim. 3:6]...a slave to care, distracted by business, afflicted with sorrow – every soul...can not only breathe the fresh air of...hope...[but also] venture with confidence into the presence of him...in whose likeness it knows itself made glorious’.<sup>5</sup> What a wonderful vision. The saints cry out that we are not called to be sinners – sin is the refusal to acknowledge our God-given nature – but that we are called to be holy. What is more, they show us the way to Him, the one who makes us holy by his grace, the one who is ‘the only adequate image of God’.<sup>6</sup> The way of holiness is a journey of becoming and a costly journey of endurance; the saints, by their example, help us along the way.

The saints are especially necessary to those of us working in the university as students and teachers, since they compel us to see that the essence of life is not intellectual prowess but an encounter of love with a person; namely,

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 83. 1, trans. I. Edmonds, CF 40 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), pp. 180-1.

<sup>6</sup> M. Corneille Halfants, ‘Introduction’, in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, vol. 2, CF 4 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1971), p. xiii.

Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> Our academic work – the mastery of our studies through reason – is nothing without love (see 1 Cor. 13:1-3), and genuine love for Christ fosters in human hearts the desire to be holy. Having been made in the image of God, we find our fulfilment in the realisation of the holiness which characterises divine being.

The sixteenth-century saint and founder of the Oratory, Philip Neri (1515-95) – pictured before you, whose feast day is today and who counted the composer of this evening's anthem, Palestrina (c. 1525-94), amongst his followers – understood that the cultivation of holiness requires the laying-low of the self; traditionally, this is called mortification. There are many stories of penances which St Philip laid upon his followers in order to humiliate, or mortify, their reason. For example, he instructed a very fine preacher to give the same sermon six times in a row, earning him something of a reputation with his flock! St Philip was well-known for showing-up the wisdom of the world for its foolishness, and the apparent folly of the Cross for its wisdom (see 1 Cor. 1:17-25). It has been written that, 'his life melts our rigid, narrow views of piety. His approach to sanctity was...all-embracing and accompanied by a good laugh. Philip always wanted his followers to become not less but more human through their striving for holiness.'<sup>8</sup> St Philip and other holy men and women remind us, in our ivory towers, that we must anchor our reason in the rich terrain of the good; holiness is the antidote to hubris.

So, then, in the company of the friends of God, let us embark upon the path to holiness – that holiness to which we are indeed called

by Christ – let us run the race, full of love; and next time someone asks you what you plan to do with your life (remember, when you were a child, they would ask you what you wanted to be when you grew up?), tell them that you want to be a stake, a signpost, a lamppost in Narnia, or a flower in the garden. Better yet, tell them that you want to be a saint.

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<sup>7</sup> See Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Saint of the Day*, ed. L. Foley, rev. P. McCloskey (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 6<sup>th</sup> edn, 2009), p. 133.