

All Saints

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

We celebrate a solemnity today—the feast of All Saints. It is, in a sense, a feast day for each one of us. Every one of us is considered to be a saint. We are called to be saints by our baptism, by a deep inner longing within each of us that longs to accomplish the destiny God has given us. One of the things we can glean from the feast of All Saints is a clearer understanding of what a saint really is. If we go back to the early Church, we find that the word "saint" was synonymous with the word "martyr," someone who gave his or her life for the Church. As time went on, the word "saint" encompassed all those who were under the guidance of the Spirit, and revealed that this Spirit had major impact on their lives. They manifested goodness, and they effected change in others. In some cases, they performed miracles. We have a system in the Church that recognizes saints by canonizing them; these are the famous ones. I think it's certainly easy to understand that most of us will not be in the category of famous, canonized saints. But that doesn't mean we aren't part of this great company of saints.

Let's look at the way in which the Church understands this great mystery. Martyrdom is a key part of what it means to be a saint, but it's too literal to say that we must give our physical lives for the Church. As I grow in my understanding of what it means to be a Christian, as I understand the struggles each of us undergo to fulfill the destiny God is calling us to, I recognize that there is a great temptation to decide that we are the ones who determine how things go. We find ourselves in the trap of being the source of our wisdom, understanding, and goodness. I don't think anyone sets out to do this in a kind of self-centered way; it's just what happens when we don't believe there is any other option. One of the great illusions that often overwhelms us is the feeling that we are alone in this world: We feel that the challenge of religion, the challenge of Christianity, asks us to do all kinds of difficult things, and that if we put our minds to the task, we can achieve these goals on our own. We can go to church, we can listen to the homilies, we can try to pattern our lives according to some semblance of the gospel. We can try to be good and forgiving to one another. Then, when we fail, we seek the sacrament of reconciliation that enables us to try again. None of that demands a great deal of faith; it just demands an understanding of what is being asked of us, and a deep desire to do it. When we look at the teaching of Christ, it becomes very clear that there is something much more mysterious than following a list of things we should or should not do. It seems to me that Jesus is talking about the miracle of transformation. We die to a self-willing and open our arms, hearts, and minds to this indwelling power of Spirit.

The "death" that a saint experiences is the death to our own egocentric way of living and an openness to living with the Spirit. We trust and believe that the Spirit is real and vital, and that it changes the direction of our lives so that we can focus on what is really important. In the reading from 1John (3:1-3), we are told that we are children of God. There are many ways to understand how we become children of God. It is in our genes

and in our destiny to live the way God lives. The best clue we have of how God lives is to look at the figure of God incarnate. We sense that Jesus is a man for others. He understood the great mystery of what happened to him at his baptism. Standing in the Jordan with his cousin John next to him, Jesus saw the Spirit descend from heaven and fill him. This spirit of affirmation and direction allowed Jesus to go through the process. Jesus was called to fulfill his destiny by giving his life for others. Jesus explained a truth that no one had understood before. The religious leaders of Jesus' time criticized and condemned him, and yet, Jesus had the fortitude to withstand all of the criticism and the judgment from those who were claiming to judge in the name of God. Jesus survived by doing what he was called to do, knowing somehow that there was a great Spirit dwelling within him.

As children of God, our inheritance is this Spirit dwelling within us. That's the heart of what it means to be a saint—to know that we are not dealing with life on our own, but rather, that we are marked with this gift of the Spirit. The Book of Revelation (7:2-4, 9-14) shows a gathering of a great company of survivors. We are talking about the saints on the other side of life, in Heaven. There are saints here on this earth, as well, and together we form a great company called the communion of saints. When we envision these people on the "other side," we recognize that they see so much more than they did while on this earth. Being a child of God means that ultimately we drop all illusions. We see God as he is, we see the world as it is, we finally see ourselves as we are. No illusions or half-truths. In this vision found in the Book of Revelation, we find all of these people standing around who are survivors of the great trial. They are chanting, "Salvation is from God." Salvation is not from me. It doesn't come from my own strength. Somehow, it comes because God decided to dwell within me. This is God's gift to us: "We have been washed in the blood of the Lamb." Mostly, the blood of Christ is used in images of covenant—the covenant between God and us. At the heart of this covenant, sealed with Christ's blood, is the promise that God will be with us always.

The great challenge of sainthood has everything to do with working toward a disposition of faith. Faith is that mysterious place where we submit, opening ourselves to this marvelous God of ours who longs to be a servant. God longs to do something for us, while at the same time doing something for the world through us. The dispositions required are those so poignantly described in the famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12). "Blest are the poor in spirit, blest are the sorrowing, blest are the lowly, blest are the hungry." It's so interesting to me that if we were to write a description of who we think are blessed with Spirit, we would say, "Blest are those who can articulate truth. Blest are those who are living a great moral life. Blest are those who give constant example of what Jesus asks us to do. Blest are those who are strong and sleek in the spiritual world." Jesus goes back to the heart of Christian living. It's not a matter of our willingness to accomplish tasks demanded of us; it goes to a radical disposition found in every human being that says, "I am poor, I am lowly. I am not enough to accomplish the challenge of the gospel. So I recognize that I need someone to support me, to be with me. I know that I am not enough. I need a partner. Not only do I not know exactly how I am going to do all the things asked of me, I'm not sure what they are." It's amazing how God keeps us in the dark; that's why we define our spiritual life as faith. Faith is believing in the things that we can't see or prove or touch. Sometimes this whole mysterious plan God has for us, our destiny, is something we never completely figure out in this world.

We are constantly invited by the gospel to put ourselves into the disposition of willingness to be used. Willingness to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. Willingness to be inconvenienced by those things we are not quite sure of. We trust and believe, even

without being sure. The images of being "poor" and "hungry" are all about need. They are about those of us who desire to do the right thing even though we are not really capable of doing so. So we trust in this mysterious power of God being more than we can be on our own. The gospel also speaks about those who begin to express the gifts of the Spirit: "Blest are those who show mercy. Blest are those who grant peace to others. Blest are those who are single-hearted." The challenge to live these dispositions is connected to the manifestation of the Spirit through us. The gifts of the Spirit, given to each person, are there for those who are in need around them. The gifts are often not for the needs of the person themselves. This means we move through life being agents of the Spirit to others. Sometimes God shows us what this means; sometimes it remains mysterious. How many times have you experienced an act of kindness—something that to the person who acts compassionately is seemingly insignificant—and it was absolutely what you needed? Or how many times have you experienced kind words at a party or dinner gathering, and it was exactly what you needed to hear? It seemed to have made all the difference in the world at that moment of struggle you were experiencing. That's what it means to be an agent of the Spirit—to know that we are being used without ever having to understand it.

Mercy is the way God describes his manner of loving. It has everything to do with acceptance, seeing past the faults and mistakes, and being filled with forgiveness. Being a peacemaker means that when we bring that Spirit to someone else, they themselves are filled with peace. I would say that those who are untouched by the Spirit are marked by anxiety—by a great deal of fear and worry. Life is difficult. There are a lot of pressures, and much work to be done. If all of that rests on our shoulders, if that is something we have to accomplish on our own, we are going to be anxious because it's more than we can handle. The opposite of faith is this feeling of grave anxiety. The peace that comes over a person filled with Spirit is life-changing. Our bodies begin to relax, our neck muscles begin to lose their tension. If we are going to pursue this disposition filled with Spirit, we will no doubt encounter a world that has difficulty understanding. That's why Matthew, the author of this gospel, put this wonderful list at the end of this passage of Jesus' teaching: "Blest are you when they insult you, persecute you, and utter every kind of slander against you because of me." That's a way of saying, "Don't expect to be understood." Don't expect everyone to say, "Yeah, that's right; of course, that's right." Persecution can be a very powerful tool to deepen our faith. I love having people around me giving me affirmation and support. Ultimately, though, being an agent of God means we are willing to do what we know God calls us to do without all of that support. There is a support already inside of us—this gift of the Spirit. With God as our partner, with his Spirit moving and strengthening us, we can withstand the persecution, the doubts and criticism of others, and somehow survive. We can survive with those who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb and who proclaim that salvation is a gift from God. Salvation is the work of our God. The challenge is to be open to mystery, to remember that all of us are invited to be saints. We are not saints on our own, but we are connected to a great company. All of us are touched by the same Spirit that unifies us. All of us are willing to give ourselves over to this plan. One day, because we are God's children, we will see and fully understand it.

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