

## **November 1, Commemoration of all the Saints.**

Any of you who have had the pleasure of visiting Rome will have noticed that the ancient Roman Pantheon has been transformed into a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary and all the Martyrs. This dedication was made by Pope Boniface IV in 609AD. The martyrs held a special place in the affection of the Christian community because they had clung to their faith even when it meant making the ultimate sacrifice. They followed Jesus in giving their life in love. At the same time people recognised the wonderful holiness of other Christian men and women whose example helped sustain the faith of the community. The Feast of All Saints extends to all the holy men and women, known and unknown, who have lived in communion with Jesus and who now enjoy the Beatific Vision in heaven. This feast seems to be of Celtic origin and has been celebrated on the 1st November since about 800AD.

Today's First Reading is taken from the Book of Revelation. Speaking of heaven the author writes: 'I saw a huge multitude, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language. They were standing in front of God's throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding victory palms in their hands'(Apocalypse 7:9).

I am sure that we can all think of people whom we trust are today part of that multitude, enjoying the communion of love in God for which we are all created. These are the people whose lives inspire us to follow their example. Their love and their prayer surround us, encouraging us to stop wasting our lives and to focus on growing in holiness.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us that we are all called to a life of holiness: 'All are called to holiness ... a holiness which is expressed in many ways by men and women who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love'(Lumen Gentium n.39).

Towards the end of the Creed which we will pray together shortly we proclaim our faith in 'the communion of saints'. Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. We belong to the family of Jesus and we belong to each other, to those who have died and have attained to the perfection of love in eternal communion with God and to all those still living here on earth and who are, as the Council says, still 'tending to the perfection of love'.

We know that we can pray for each other and when we are suffering or feeling alone, it is a great comfort to remember that people are praying for us. We are especially grateful for the prayer of those who have allowed God's love to so transform their lives that all the branches that do not bear the fruit of love have been pruned away till their whole life is a harvest of love. To change the image. We are like a candle. Ignited by Jesus, we are being drawn ever closer to him till our flame is one with his and like Saint Paul we can say: 'I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me'(Galatians 2:20).

When the saints in heaven and those on earth who are being transformed by Jesus' love take us into their heart and hold us in their prayer we are being warmed by the love that glows in their heart. All baptised Christians belong in this family. We are never alone. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says: 'Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the

sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God'(Hebrews 12:1-2).

Saint Bernard reminds us of how much the saints help us: 'When I think of them, I feel myself inflamed by a tremendous yearning. Calling the saints to mind inspires us and arouses in us a longing to enjoy their company. We long to be united in happiness with all the saints. The saints want us to be with them; let us not be indifferent. They await us; let us not ignore them'(Sermon 2, see Office of Readings Nov 1st).

### Saint Therese

For me, the best example of the continuing care showered on us by the saints is an experience which I had in January 1994 in Cairo, Egypt. Therese died at 24 of TB. Though she spent her life in an enclosed Carmelite convent in Lisieux, France, her heart was as big as the world. She wanted to be a priest. She wanted to be a missionary. She was one of those people who wanted to be everything. Her love was such that the Church has made her a patroness of missions. One of her last statements from her deathbed was that she would spend her heaven doing good upon earth.

In early 1994 I was lecturing on Scripture in Haifa, Israel. During a break in the lecturing an opportunity arose to go with a Carmelite priest friend to visit Egypt. We stayed in a Carmelite monastery in Cairo in the suburb of Choubrah. By the year 400 a large proportion of Egyptians had become Christians and those who resisted the Arab invasion of the 7th century form what we call the Coptic Christians. Most of these look upon their own Egyptian Pope as their spiritual leader, though some look to the bishop of Rome. They are the direct descendants of the ancient Egyptian people. Over the last two hundred years of European influence in Egypt there has also been a presence in Egypt of European Catholic Christians in communion with Rome. However, as you know, today, 90% of Egyptians are Moslem.

I was surprised to discover that everyone in Cairo knows the Carmelite church in Choubrah which is dedicated to Saint Therese, called by Catholics, Copts and Moslems alike 'the Saint'. In the crypt of the church there is a statue of Therese on her death bed, enclosed in a glass case. All day long people process into the church to pray to her. They have the custom of writing their prayers out and leaving them near the statue. The walls are covered with expressions of gratitude for miracles received through the intercession of Therese. I believe that I witnessed a miracle myself and it is a miracle that happens every day. I was in the crypt praying and saw a young veiled Moslem woman enter. She wanted to pray to the Saint but was unable to write her prayer. A middle aged Copt man was offering to help her and since neither of them had a pencil a small Catholic girl from the neighbouring school came up and lent them hers. This was the time when Moslem fundamentalists were shooting at tourist buses in an effort to stop tourism and inflict economic harm on the government, and yet here before me was a miracle of peace. A Coptic Christian man, a Moslem woman and a Catholic schoolgirl all huddled together composing a prayer to Saint Therese. I could see Therese's prayer being answered. She is indeed spending her heaven drawing everyone together in love by drawing them to Jesus, the one to whom she consecrated her life.

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The saints are enjoying the fullness of love for which we are all created. Saint Paul tells us: 'Now we see only a dim reflection. Then we will see face to face. Now we know only imperfectly; then we will know fully, even as we are fully known'(1Corinthians 13:12). Saint John has the same teaching. In today's **Second Reading** he assures us that in heaven we will be like God 'for we shall see God as he really is'(1John 3:2). He goes on to remind us that to see God as God really is, we must be pure 'as pure as Christ'.

Life is, in many ways, like a fire. If we accept life as it comes and keep our hearts focused on God who is present to us in every situation, we will find that God's love will indeed purify us. Our temptation is to avoid things and to live in distraction. The saints remind us to keep seeking love until our whole being is drawn into the fire of God's love. Then, like two candles jointed together, there is but one flame and our hearts burn with Jesus' love for God and for others. We are not like this yet, but neither were the saints. They allowed themselves to be purified by love and we too are called to 'tend toward the perfection of love'.

Loving will purify us till we, too, are numbered among the saints whose lives we commemorate today.