



Heavenly Days: Commemorating the Saints

PHILIP H. PFATTEICHER

Remembering the saints is not a peripheral enterprise in the life of the church. Keeping them in mind goes to the essence of the church and to the heart of the gospel.

Thomas Cranmer's collect for All Saints' Day in the *Book of Common Prayer* provides a splendid summary of the nature of the whole church, on earth and in heaven.

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting.¹

It is not surprising that, beginning with the *Church Book* of 1868, Lutherans in North America have borrowed this concise and descriptive prayer for their service books.

¹*The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979) 245.

The commemoration of the saints goes to the heart of the gospel and is a necessary reminder of the unity of the whole church, militant and triumphant. The variety of gifts praised by the New Testament is reflected in a wide-ranging and inclusive calendar of representatives drawn from every land and occupation and every age since Christ.

ONE CHURCH IN HEAVEN AND EARTH

We need constantly to be reminded that the church extends well beyond the boundaries of our particular denomination (or part of a denomination)² and is a worldwide fellowship of the baptized. Moreover, those who have died are not lost to the church, nor are they separated from its communion. Death is but a narrow stream that does not break the unity of God's people, nor does it divide us on earth from the far larger number of those who have passed its boundary. Charles Wesley, whose devotion was shaped by the Prayer Book, wrote of this unity:

Let saints on earth in concert sing
With those whose work is done;
For all the servants of our King
In heaven and earth are one.

One family we dwell in him,
One Church, above, beneath,
Though now divided by the stream,
The narrow stream of death.³

Together, saints on earth and saints above form one organism, the body of Christ. Isaac Watts, from a Nonconformist point of view, provides a similar understanding in his hymn: "Give me the wings of faith to rise / Within the veil and see / The saints above...."⁴

The church at its best has always understood this inclusive unity. The suffrages in the medieval Latin breviary—borrowed by Wilhelm Loehe and by the editors of the Lutheran *Common Service Book* and *The Service Book and Hymnal*—reflected a strong sense of the wholeness of the community as they prayed in succession for the civil authority, the clergy and laity, the congregation of God's people, the faithful departed, and those who were absent. One may detect in these Latin prayers their origin in the community of a monastery, but they are also an admirable model for a congregation or even for individual prayer that embraces the whole body of Christ.⁵

The foundation of such an understanding is laid in Holy Baptism. At the chrismation of the candidate the baptismal rite makes the remarkable assertion, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." The anointing and signation is for a lifetime, but not as we usually understand the word. The seal and sign will last for the duration of the new and everlasting life that

²The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's use of "churchwide" to refer to itself is unfortunate. More accurately, a "churchwide assembly" would be an ecumenical council.

³*The Hymnal 1982* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985) #526.

⁴*Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958) #594. See also *The Hymnal 1982* #253.

⁵The suffrages, though without these particular prayers, are found in the *Common Service Book* (Philadelphia: Board of Publication of the United Lutheran Church in America, 1918) 153–154; *Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958) 153–154. For the full form, see *The Daily Prayer of the Church*, ed. Philip H. Pfatfeitcher (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2005) 975–977, 1143–1145.

begins at baptism—that is to say, as the baptismal liturgy boldly declares, they will last forever. They mark us for all eternity.

Death may change us, but death is not the end. And this brings us to the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ and its proclamation in the church. The center of the Christian year and of the gospel itself is the Pascha, the unitive celebration of the death and resurrection of Christ, the Christian way of celebrating the Passover. The paschal victory of Christ, his passage through death to life, recapitulates the experience of his and our ancient ancestors in their passage from slavery, through the sea, to the promised land. That costly triumph is the heart of Christian faith and life. Through Holy Baptism each Christian is given a share in that passage from death to life, and, in each one who is baptized, the transforming grace of God is at work.

SAINTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament sometimes applies the term “saint” to all the baptized (for example, Acts 9:13, 32, 41; 26:10; Rom 8:27; 12:13; 16:2; 1 Cor 6:1; 16:1), and there are those who have latched on to that use and who declare confidently, “We are all saints.” In the early years of the church such an assertion made a great deal of sense, because becoming a Christian was a protracted and demanding process of growing commitment and gradual initiation, and being a Christian meant a life of hardship, persecution, and perhaps martyrdom. Then, it was the saints against the world. In the twenty-first century, however, when church membership is easily achieved and often involves no sacrifice, and when church rolls include great numbers of merely nominal members, it is dangerous to declare, “We are all saints.” Such an assertion plays directly into the hands of the spirit of the age in which each of us needs and deserves to be “affirmed” in whatever we choose to be or do, and in which affirmation the church is expected to participate.

when church membership is easily achieved and often involves no sacrifice, and when church rolls include great numbers of merely nominal members, it is dangerous to declare, “We are all saints”

The New Testament, upon closer examination, reveals a developing understanding of sanctity, the people of God, and the Christian calling and life. Many times Christians are indiscriminately called saints to distinguish them from the profane world. But there are also times when sanctity is not to be understood as a present condition but a goal to which the church is being led. This more developed understanding of sainthood is helpful to us today. Being a “saint” (from *sanctus*, a holy person) is not a present accomplishment; it is rather a goal toward which the baptized are to strive as the transforming grace of God works in them. Christians are called to be and become saints (see Rom 1:7 and 1 Cor 1:2, both verses from

books that also call all the baptized saints). There is no one simple New Testament definition of “saint,” and a responsible understanding sees the term in a rich and profound way. Martin Luther shared such an understanding:

This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.⁶

Such a view has encouraged Lutherans, especially in Finland, to reexamine the Eastern Orthodox teaching of the divinization of the baptized. As Athanasius (d. 373) declared, “[God], indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.”⁷ The summons to become saints is extended to the whole human race.

As the young church grew and became more inclusive in its embrace, there were those in whom the grace of God was more clearly apparent than in others, those who clearly reflected the self-forgetting, self-giving love that included both a profoundly intimate relationship with God and a readiness to give of themselves and to serve humanity. What the world sees and what God sees, of course, may not be the same, and we must always remember the limitations of human judgment. There are always those whose faith is known only to God. Nonetheless, within the vast membership of the church, there are certain people who seem to us worthy of emulation. These may be called saints in the more restrictive meaning of the word.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CALENDAR OF SAINTS

The martyrs, who followed Christ into death and thus into life, were the first to be honored. As popular veneration of others increased, bishops sought to regulate such developing local cults. In the West, the pope canonized Ulrich of Augsburg in 993, the first such papal declaration. Toward the end of the twelfth century, Pope Alexander III declared that no one was to be recognized as a saint without the authorization of the Roman Church. Canonization, adding a name to the approved catalogue of saints, became a carefully detailed and centralized legal process. In the East, the process has not been so tightly formalized, and the earlier ecumenical practice long prevailed. Saints were recognized locally and approved by the bishop.⁸ Today in the East, canonizations are generally made by a synod of bishops, although sometimes a cult is accepted without any formal canonization. The resulting calendars of the Latin and the Eastern churches are notably heavy with clerics and religious. Laypeople are underrepresented, giving a distorted view of the church and of holiness.

⁶Martin Luther, “Defense and Explanation of All the Articles” (1521), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 32 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958) 24.

⁷Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. A. R. C. M. V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993) 93.

⁸For a detailed account from an Antiochian Orthodox point of view, see Paul D. Garrett, “Canonization,” *The Sacred Art Journal* 11/2 (1990) 55–82.

After the Reformation, the feast days of the apostles and the evangelists, together with a few selected days commemorating events in the Gospels, remained on Lutheran and Anglican calendars. Wilhelm Loehe in the nineteenth century enriched the sanctoral calendar with names from the Roman martyrology, going even beyond the Roman practice by adding to the calendar illustrious figures from the Hebrew Bible as well. Frieder Schultz prepared an Evangelical Calendar of Names in German in 1962, which greatly expanded the roll of Christians worthy of re-

there is a growing concern among Anglicans and Lutherans to expand their calendars to correct the impression that nothing of interest happened in the history of the church after the first century, except the Reformation of the sixteenth century

membrance, including mystics, hymn writers, and many beyond the Catholic and Lutheran traditions (George Fox, John Eliot, Anne Askew, William Penn, for example). This calendar represented a growing concern among Anglicans and Lutherans to expand their calendars to correct the impression that nothing of interest happened in the history of the church after the first century, except the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Both churches wanted to make clear that God is at work in every century and in every place. The Episcopal Church began the process of expanding the calendar in the *Book of Common Prayer* by the continuing series *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (1963, 1973, 1980, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2006). The calendar introduced in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978; the preparatory book on the calendar had been published in 1973) was more venturesome, reaching to the edge of the church (Dag Hammarskjöld), including some whom Lutherans once viewed as enemies (Calvin and Thomas Aquinas), attempting a better balance of women and men, clergy and laity, and providing a representative from every Christian century and every inhabited continent. Those commemorated were generally remembered on their “heavenly birthday,” even if this meant doubling up commemorations.⁹ The title “saint” was retained for biblical people, as had been the Lutheran and Anglican custom, but, in part to avoid oddities such as “St. George Fox,” the title was not accorded to any who came afterward, not even Francis of Assisi, whom no one, not even in the secular world, hesitates to call “St. Francis.”

The interest in remembering the cloud of witnesses extends beyond the traditionally liturgical churches. In 1995 the Order of St. Luke published *For All the Saints: A Calendar of Commemorations for United Methodists*.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the *Lutheran Service Book* of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod has greatly expanded the calendar of its predecessor books, *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941) and *Lutheran Worship* (1982), with Lutheran figures, such as Bugenhagen, Chemnitz, and Wyneken; additional biblical

⁹February 23, for example, for both Polycarp and Ziegenbalg. The decision proved to be unworkable in actual practice, forcing choices one should not have to make.

persons, such as Joseph of Arimathea, Philip the Deacon, Elizabeth and Zechariah; other figures from Christian history, such as Justinian, Constantine, Cyprian of Carthage, and the Venerable Bede; and, an innovation in the West, but following Loehe, people from the Old Testament (including Adam and Eve). In this book, as has been the Lutheran practice, the Apostles and Evangelists are given the title “saint”; others, including other biblical people, are not accorded the title.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has continued the calendar of its predecessor, the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, making a few additions (Agnes and Peter Claver, for example) and creating some groupings of figures who have something in common (the missionaries Ziegenbalg, Heyer, and Nommensen), but has removed the title “saint” even from the biblical people (for example, “The Conversion of Paul”).

Each of the two current Lutheran hymnals has its peculiar curiosities, forcing the richness of Christianity into its own distinctive way of doing things. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, perhaps because the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has bishops but not archbishops, calls everyone in the episcopal office “bishop,” resulting in oddities and inaccuracies such as Anselm, “Bishop of Canterbury,” and Nathan Söderblom, “Bishop of Uppsala” (the Bishop of Uppsala is a different person from the one who is Archbishop and Primate). The *Lutheran Service Book*, perhaps because the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod does not have bishops, calls every cleric on the calendar “pastor” (“Athanasius of Alexandria, Pastor and Confessor”; “Irenaeus of Lyons, Pastor”). In a different setting that usage could be a useful reminder to bishops that they are to be pastors of their diocese.

THE VARIETY OF GIFTS

A wide-ranging calendar teaches an important insight of the New Testament: the variety of gifts that enrich the church. We do not all possess the same gifts, and that is a very good thing. The body of Christ has “many members, and not all the members have the same function,” says St. Paul. “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us,” and he lists, as examples of the various gifts, prophecy, ministering, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, and cheerful compassion (Rom 12:4–8). Paul says again to the Corinthians, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (1 Cor 12:4–6).

A calendar of saints ought to remind us of the variety of gifts that enrich the church by commemorating a wide variety of people and bridging the gulfs that separate classes and occupations and denominations. It ought to confront us with new and unaccustomed voices, even alien voices, who challenge us to grow with a broader and deeper understanding of the size and extent of the church of God.

But with it all, we must be careful to listen to St. Paul’s primary concern, especially clear in 1 Corinthians: the variety of gifts is not to be encouraged as if diver-

sity were desirable in itself. That is an idea commonly heard in the church today, but it turns the long tradition on its head. Paul is concerned that the church understand above all its unity. One Spirit, one Lord, one God bestows and activates all these gifts. An ancient collect from the Gregorian sacramentary, now appointed for Thursday in Easter Week in the Roman sacramentary and in the Episcopal *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, has it exactly right: “O God, you have united a diversity of peoples in the confession of your Name: Grant that all who have been born again in the waters of baptism may be united in faith and in holiness of life.” Such is the mind of the church: Christians are gathered from the ends of the earth from all races and nations and peoples and are made into the one body of Christ through Holy Baptism. Diversity is transformed into unity.

a calendar of saints ought to remind us of the variety of gifts that enrich the church by commemorating a wide variety of people and bridging the gulfs that separate classes and occupations and denominations

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

In practical terms, especially since few non-Roman Catholic parishes have daily services, what does one do with a calendar of saints? At a minimum, a congregation would do well to begin with two things: (1) observe the day of the Evangelist whose Gospel is the focus of the Lectionary cycle that year (Matthew in 2008), and (2) celebrate the patronal feast of the congregation (St. Paul’s Church on January 25 or June 29, for example). For churches with unpromising titles, finding or inventing an appropriate day provides a useful exercise. First Church, for example, might choose St. Stephen, the first martyr, or St. Andrew, the “first called” as he is known in the Byzantine tradition.

Further exploration of the use of the calendar should be encouraged. The observance of a representative of each category of saint might be useful: a martyr (St. Stephen perhaps), an apostle (such as St. Peter and St. Paul or St. James the Elder), a missionary (St. Patrick could be instructive), a renewer of the church (St. Francis of Assisi would be a popular choice), a renewer of society (Martin Luther King Jr., for example), a teacher (we can learn from Thomas Aquinas), a hymn writer (Charles Wesley rewards careful study), a painter (Albrecht Dürer would be a good choice), and a translator (William Tyndale’s work continues to shape the English Bible). Different representatives could be chosen in different years.

A congregation might choose to celebrate a saint a month at a special, perhaps weekday, Eucharist.

A parish could observe a day representative of the ethnic character of the congregation (or the original ethnic character if the parish has grown away from the heritage of its founders)—Cyril and Methodius for Slovaks, St. Olaf for Norwe-

gians, for example. This ought not serve to parade triumphalism or to hark back to the good old days, but to explore the history of the congregation. Such a celebration might reveal, for example, that a parish founded by immigrant European families now serves primarily immigrant Asian or Latino families and that the constant in its ministry is a concern for newcomers to the community.

Those saints whose commemoration falls during the week could be remembered in the Sunday prayers. Notes describing representatives from the cloud of witnesses ought to appear in the worship folder or in the parish newsletter, teaching the congregation its own tradition, its denominational heritage, and the larger history of Christianity.

Remembering the saints is essential in maintaining a complete understanding of the faith. We must know our family roots. We must know our long and rich history. We must know how God works in a vast variety of individuals. We must know the goal to which our ethical responsibility calls us. We must know how large the church is and how it is one in heaven and on earth. We must constantly be called back to the central proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ our Lord. When we celebrate the saints we are not honoring heroes; we are celebrating the transforming grace of God and receiving encouragement and strength from the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. They are our companions in the struggle for sanctity. ⊕

PHILIP H. PFATTEICHER is associate pastor of First English Lutheran Church in downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and adjunct professor of sacred music at Duquesne University. His most recent book is New Book of Festivals and Commemorations: A Proposed Calendar of Saints (Fortress, 2008).