

The Celebration of All Saints Day
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,
St. Francisville, LA
4 November 2018

John 11:32-44

The spirits of the dead played an important role in my childhood. I grew up in a culture filled with spirits, saints, angels, curses, demonic possessions, and evil spirits. On the positive side, there was an appreciation for love. Love was too strong a reality to be exhausted by just one life time. The spirits of those who have loved us remain with us, interact with us, speak to us, and form an important part of our daily lives. It was not like the Mexican tradition of the Day of the Dead, where “Ofrendas” or offerings are placed in made-up altars once a year, to allow the spirits of the dead to come and visit their living relatives. The Colombian tradition was wider than that. The spirits of the dead were with us all year round and not just once a year. We talked about our dead almost daily, we offered masses for the dead on the anniversary of their deaths, we placed flowers on their tombs weekly, we spoke to them quietly, as you speak to a friend who is always with you. They were everywhere and they brought you comfort and solace. Everyone had a patron saint, and there was a saint for every occasion: If you were abandoned by your parents you prayed to St. Luigi Orione; if you suffered from arthritis you prayed to Saint James the Greater; if you were a traveler in need of protection you prayed to St. Christopher; if you lost your keys, you prayed to St. Anthony, and so on.

On a more negative side, there were spirits that sought to do you harm. Everyone was worried about the “Evil Eye”, which was caused by envious people passing an illness to you or your children just by looking at you, aided by evil spirits. You never let your children wander out at night because you knew “La Llorona” would come and drown them in the local rivers. You were always on alert because there were evil forces everywhere, tempting you, tripping you, inciting you to rebellion against your parents or God. Exorcisms were common, all-night prayer vigils were popular, novenas for the souls in purgatory were said every night, and everyone knew that countless rosaries were an effective tool to keep evil spirits away.

This was a world where everyone had a guardian angel to protect you from danger, where the spirits of the dead were always with you and looked after you, and where you had a saint for all calamities, all blessings, and all professions. Teachers, doctors, scientists and even prostitutes had a patron saint who would intercede on their behalf and act as a translator of prayers or a defense attorney, advocating to God for them. Of course, everyone knew that the ultimate saint and advocate was none other than the Virgin Mary herself and everyone had a scapular of the “virgencita” hanging from their necks at all times. It could be the Virgin of El Cobre, La Candelaria, Guadalupe, or

hundreds of other images of Mary. It didn't matter which image of the Virgin you had. All that mattered was that you had her with you at all times.

All of these patron saints, guardian angels, and virgins answered one important question: Who speaks for this person? The Catholic faith adopted many of these practices from the old concept of *patronage*. In the ancient world, when you were arrested for some offense, it was extremely important that a person of means, a lord, a high ranking politician, or a well-known friend came to testify on your behalf. Judges would often ask, "Who speaks for this man?" At which point the *patron* or character witness would advocate for clemency or even for a pardon. Often, the person would be given a lenient sentence or even pardon because of the honor of the patron. In the same way, the angels and saints had a job to do for you. They were your advocates in the celestial courts, and they were your guides on your earthly life. You didn't feel so alone. You knew that forces in the divine realm were concerned for you and were always ready to lend a hand. These popular beliefs were encouraged by many entrepreneurs who sold their scapulars and novenas at local bookstores and religious markets. And, in many ways, the Church encouraged this piety because it built devotion and inspired generosity.

As much as I can criticize these practices for the obvious abuses, what frustrated me the most was the distance these practices created between average people and the saints. We thought so extremely high of them that for us the saints were super-good people who had incredible grace and power. Because of their high standing with God, they were allowed to do supernatural acts on behalf of average people. Many of them could levitate, bi-locate, heal and do all sorts of great things. It was very cool! Growing up we didn't need Steve Jobs, the Internet, or any apps. We had a saint for all problems and all reasons. Are you lost? We have a saint for that! Do you have constipation? We have a saint for that! Your girlfriend left you and now you are depressed? Worry not, we have a saint for that! The problem with this understanding of the saints as the super-endowed, the super-good, the super-graceful is that this understanding leaves both you and I out. We have nothing in common with them. We don't levitate! We don't bi-locate! We have no magic powers. We are just garden-variety humans.

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, and the feast calls us to celebrate the lives of those giants of the faith who gave their lives for the service of others or who were martyred for their faith in Jesus of Nazareth. But, today is more than a feast to remember the super-good and to feel guilty that we can't measure up. Today is not about us missing the mark, failing to love perfectly, unable to remain obedient to God. Today is not about guilt that our faith is not as perfect as the faith of those officially recognized as saints.

The real purpose for this feast is to remember those who came before us in the faith. Average people like you and I who struggled to be faithful daily, who searched for a deeper relationship with God and others, who sometimes doubted and wondered about

the purpose of their lives and God's place in their world, who often became angry and impatient when things were not how they wanted them to be, who tried their best to be good people and fulfill their commitments to God and others, who were broken as all humans are broken, who searched for more emotional and spiritual freedom, and who were often assaulted by anxiety and fear. Today is also about us who, like them, have the courage to show up before this altar every week, seeking the only advocate, defender, protector, and guide we truly need, Jesus of Nazareth. Today is a day to remember those whose faith and struggles paved the way for us, and about us who have the fortune to build on that legacy of faith they left for us.

This is a very important feast because it calls us to remembrance. We are forgetful people and sometimes we feel as though our struggles are singularly special and no one has ever been afflicted with the same kinds of afflictions. Today, we remember that many of our ancestors have been just like Lazarus, completely unable to heal themselves, completely alone in their spiritual death, feeling completely abandoned and isolated from God and others. Yet, in some miraculous way we don't quite understand, Jesus became real for many of them and gave them the life, the strength, the hope, and the power to get up and keep on walking. Today, we remember that many of our ancestors suffered the same afflictions we suffer and, in that sense, we are not alone on this journey. They sat on those pews and said their prayers, dreamt their dreams, shared the common cup, and ate the bread of God's presence among us. They came to this altar to be nurtured and strengthened and God became real in their lives through his Son. Today, we remember their faith and their devotion and we give thanks for their lives.

But, today we also remember God's faithfulness. God has been with us since before we were born. He has faithfully led us to this day and he knows our struggles and our pain. He has not left us to our own devices. He has not abandoned us. He is here for us as he was here for our ancestors. He is the answer we are looking for. His Son is the solution to the problem. Those who came before us knew this and I pray that you may know this. God is with us, God is here, and Christ is all we need.

I pray today that we may live into that relationship with Christ and never forget where we came from. We stand on the shoulders of great giants, and the same God who blessed them and led them to the finish line, is with us and will lead us to the finish line. I pray that we may have courage and hope today. May Christ bless your lives in profound and amazing ways. Amen!