

FOR ALL THE SAINTS
Teaching for All Saints Day
LPC, 11/1/09
(Read by Lay Leader)

When your rector was a teenager, she cleaned house for an elderly, disabled lady who lived nearby. The lady was very mild and sweet, but her collection of saint statuary was enough to give a person nightmares.

Each plaster statue was about two feet tall and garishly painted. Their ashy complexions and ruby lips suggested vampirism. Your rector thought at the time that if this is what sainthood is, she'd take a pass, thank you very much.

Fortunately, as in so many things, the Episcopal Church has a moderate and broad-minded view of sainthood. The Episcopal approach stops short of actually venerating saints, while recognizing that nothing is quite so instructive and inspiring as the example of another human being doing good in the world for the sake of Christ. All Saints Day seems a good opportunity for teaching about the role of saints in our unique tradition.

In the early days of Christianity, the word "saint" referred to any member of Christ's Church. But from the beginning, martyrs and extraordinarily holy people received special recognition. Eventually the designation of saint came to be primarily associated with these special heroes. Meanwhile, the number of recognized saints proliferated. An entry about All Saints Day in *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church* suggests that Christian missionaries in ancient Britain encouraged the celebration of saints as a way of co-opting the polytheistic native religion.

By the Middle Ages, myriad practices had accrued to the recognition of saints in the Roman Catholic Church. Of these, the practice of invoking saints to intercede was particularly abhorrent to the Protestant Reformers of the 16th century. The Reformers argued that humanity has need of only one intercessor before God the Father, and that is Jesus Christ. They held that to pray to or through saints is unnecessary and undermines the unique preeminence of Christ.

The Church of England, from which the Episcopal Church derives, has always distinguished itself from both Catholic and Protestant extremes. However, the Thirty-Nine Articles, promulgated by the Church of England in 1563 in an effort to define itself vis-à-vis both Catholics and Calvinist reformers, took a dim view of saints. The "Invocation of Saints" is condemned in Article XXII, along with Purgatory and other "Romish Doctrines" as "a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God."

It is hard to say how far this disapproval of saints went, in practice. Many Anglican and Episcopal Churches bear the names of saints, and saints figure in our

liturgy. Probably it has never been saints *per se* that have bothered Anglicans, but rather the idolatry that has been associated with saints.

Today saints have an honored place in the practice of the Episcopal Church, but our understanding differs from that of the Catholic Church, where canonization is a rigorous process involving the authentication of at least two genuine miracles. Our process for naming saints is quite different. We share many saints, however. The Episcopal “calendar” of saints retains heroes of the Christian Church who were canonized before our parent English Church split from Rome.

We also have saints of our own. And we have an understanding of saints that does not require validation by miracles. According to the church publication *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, a saint is someone who witnesses heroically to Christ. To be considered for inclusion in the calendar of saints of the Episcopal Church, a person must exhibit such characteristics as extraordinary faith, love, goodness, joy, service to others for Christ’s sake, and faithfulness. These traits must be widely recognized in the broad community of faith over generations. Often people are not candidates for inclusion unless their reputation for holiness has endured for at least fifty years after their death.

The usual process begins with local recognition and celebration of an extraordinary Christian. That recognition and celebration then finds its expression in liturgy. A Collect, or prayer, is composed, and Bible lessons appropriate for a Eucharist service are chosen. When the memorial celebration spreads to other parishes and gains wider support, a petition is submitted to the General Convention of the National Church. The petition must be supported by at least three bodies officially recognized by the Episcopal Church (such as parishes or religious orders). General Convention must approve the petition at two successive conventions. (General Convention meets every three years.)

To give you an idea of who gets added to the calendar of saints, consider the latest additions to the calendar of saints, approved at the 2009 General Convention in Anaheim. They are Harriet Bedell, a missionary to the Seminole Indians; James Theodore Holly, the first African American Bishop in the Episcopal Church; Óscar Romero, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador who was assassinated while celebrating Mass; Tikhon, a Russian Orthodox bishop; Vida Dutton Scudder, an educator and social activist. and Frances Joseph Gaudet, a prison reformer.

Their stories are uniformly inspiring. There is nothing plastery, or vampirish, about them. They are ordinary people who did extraordinary things in the name of Christ.

As Episcopalians, we don’t pray to them. We don’t ask them to advocate for us before God. We read their stories and remember them. We give thanks for the variety of their gifts and for the evidence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. And hopefully, inspired by their example, we begin to ask ourselves where God might be calling *us*.

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