

Saints with and without halos

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It is impossible, I believe, to have another All Saints Day come and go without recalling and giving thanks for those saints without halos—family members, mentors and friends—who were gifts of God to us and who now worship before the throne. Perhaps the first thing to do on All Saints Day is to remember them and give thanks to God for their presence in our lives.

We give thanks also for those who, like Martin Luther King Jr., gave powerful public witness in working for justice for all people; for those who, like Mother Teresa, were living examples of caring for the least of these; for those who, like St. Francis, taught us about caring for the whole creation; for those who, like Jimmy Carter and Al Gore, demonstrated that our most significant contributions to the world's welfare can come after retirement; for those who, like the Amish in Pennsylvania who lost children in a school shooting, show us that it is possible to forgive those who have caused us almost unbearable harm or loss.

Saint-making, we know, is God's doing, not our own accomplishment. One becomes holy by being connected in baptism to the holy one, Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. But saints aren't perfect. As Martin Luther pointed out, we are simultaneously saints and sinners.

So the saints of God that we remember and give thanks for today include also the family member who always manages to rub us the wrong way, the high-maintenance friend who often seems to need more than we can give. It includes the people—ourselves also—who sometimes find it difficult to believe that God can possibly love those whose lifestyle or belief system differs from our own. It means that when we find out years after their death that some of those we've placed on high pedestals—such as Mother Teresa—have clay feet, it doesn't make them seem less saintly but only more human.

All of us less-than-perfect people, living and dead, are part of the communion of saints. In our imperfections we give witness to the lavish love of God, who receives us by grace and knits us all together in one holy church, the body of Christ.

In a seniors' Bible study several years ago, someone asked a question that reduced all of us to silence:

Do you think that Jesus did Lazarus a favor by bringing him back to life? After all, Lazarus had already died once, gone through what we call "the dying process." Would he feel Jesus was doing him any favors by calling him forth from the grave, when he would someday only have to go through it all again?

Or was Lazarus, after his resurrection, like those who have had a near-death experience today? Did he see a light at the end of a dark tunnel and feel a warmth that he was drawn to and an end to any fear of death? Did he regret leaving that behind and being brought back to this dog-eat-dog world? Or did he feel nothing but joy and gratitude to have his life back again? To have a chance to right some of the wrongs he had done the first time around? Did he resolve soon after the onlookers unwrapped the grave clothes that clung to him to be a new person, to appreciate and live each day to the fullest? Was it a favor that Jesus did for Lazarus?

What we do know is that in a certain sense Lazarus's story is our story, for we have already died once in baptism. Jesus calls us out by name from death to life and gives us daily a new beginning.