

# Heavenly heroes. Now that's good company



Have you ever felt linked with someone, even when separated by distance? Many people – parents and children, friends and lovers – attest to this kind of experience. Whether it be separation due to a holiday, a move interstate, forced partings due to war, or even death, time and again we see evidence that the bonds of love can connect people in a way that transcends the immediate physical presence. It is this kind of experience of love that can help us grasp the Catholic understanding of the communion of saints.

Catholics believe that the community of the Church reaches beyond earthly constraints of time and space, to embrace those who have died in the peace of Christ. Such is the unity of our Christian family that not even death can separate us. It is this spiritual relationship between the Church family on earth and all who have died in God's friendship that we refer to when we speak of the 'communion of saints'.

## The saints: heroes of the Church

We all need people to look up to; people whose lives embody ideals we hold important and strive to emulate. Every form of human community has heroes. In Australian society, football stars are an obvious example. The Australia Day Honours List awards the outstanding achievements of our citizens.

The Church community, too, is full of heroes and heroines. From the earliest days, it honoured the Apostles and the Christian martyrs who witnessed to their faith in Jesus even to the point of death. From generation to generation, the Church has continued to add to this list particular men and women, holding them up as examples of

### Approaching the Topic

Does your family have a way of reverencing its deceased members? Many homes display treasured photographs of loved ones. Families will often visit a grave site on the anniversary of a death. Sometimes painful, sometimes comforting, gestures like these are ways in which families keep alive precious memories.

The Catholic community, too, has ways of reverencing its deceased members. Special feast days, statues, holy cards, processions... Each year on the first two days of November (the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of All Souls), Catholics throughout the world make a special point of celebrating those who have gone before them in faith: their predecessors in the Communion of Saints.

what it means to live a Christ-like life, so that we can learn from them and imitate their qualities.

## The 'A' Team!

### (Canonised Saints)

St Paul used the term 'the saints' to refer to the baptised Christians, even those living on earth. This understanding still holds today. In common usage, however, we tend to use the word 'saint' to refer to those popularly acclaimed by the Catholic community. Mother Teresa of Calcutta would be a good example. Her work amongst the dying in India is internationally recognised both within and outside the Church. From among such saintly people, the church sometimes nominates a particular saint to be held up for public honour and imitation. We call these 'canonised' saints. A feast day is kept in their honour each year. Saints are sometimes nominated as patrons of some work or occupation or class of people with which they were particularly associated during their lifetime. Catholics often give their child the name of a saint at baptism. This is a beautiful practice if taken seriously, as the child grows up with a special 'hero' to fire their

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energy and imagination and draw strength from throughout his or her Christian life.

## Go for greatness!

### (How the saints empower us.)

The heroic lives of the saints extend our horizons. They show us what is

possible for those who follow the Lord. However, it is not just the fact of their earthly lives that makes the communion of saints important to us. The saints' great victory is that they are in communion with one another in the very presence of God right now. Isn't that a mind-blowing thought! It takes us beyond our earthbound ways of viewing reality. Furthermore, Catholics believe we are already part of that communion shared by the saints. It isn't just something we hope for in the future. We are, even now, part of the one family of God stretching across heaven and earth. So the saints remind us that we already walk with them in the presence of God. They are a tremendous source of hope and strength to us. They help us focus our sights on what is really important and shake us out of our earthbound way of seeing things.

## Praying to the saints

To talk of praying to the saints can sometimes cause confusion when people mistaken this to mean substituting the worship due to God with the honour due to human beings. The Catholic Church teaches that God and God alone is the focus of our adoration. Where the saints

come in, is with their ability to help bring us into the presence of God and to open us to the Spirit in prayer. It is a common and beautiful practice for Christians to turn to each other for support and encouragement in their faith, and to ask each other to pray for them. Devotion and praying to the saints is an extension of this practice of drawing support from our faith family. Far from undermining adoration of God, Catholics experience devotion to the saints as a way of strengthening their relationship with God in the body of Christ.

When you view the Church as a family, rather than simply as an

## Not just a pretty face...

Lest we think of the saints as dusty statues with plastic faces, let us remember that they were real flesh and blood men and women like us, with imperfections as well as virtues. Indeed, some of them had failings as outstanding as their virtues! St Jerome is renowned for his biblical scholarship, but it seems he was something of a misogynist! Cyril of Alexandria is remembered for his fine mind which he applied brilliantly to theological debate; however, his continuous embroilment is controversy seems also to have been fired by political jealousies and a bad temper! Even the great apostles Peter and Paul are portrayed in the scriptures as being at logger heads over certain issues.

The Church canonises certain saints, not because they were perfect people but because their exhibited qualities which the Church most needed modelled at a given time. 'Saint' is not simply a title to reward a person for goodness. Rather, saints are canonised because they have something to offer the Church in terms of vision, example and direction. In the early days of Christianity, most of the saints were martyrs because persecution was a daily reality for the ordinary believer. People who accepted their death or physical suffering in order to proclaim Jesus as Lord, held out a living ideal to the embryonic Church struggling to survive the hostilities that surrounded its members.

Then there were the apologists, those who fiercely defended the truth through their keen grasp of theology and language, as the Church struggled to express its beliefs in doctrinal formulas. When the Church of the fourth century was seriously threatened by the heresy of Arianism (a popular belief that undermined the divinity of Jesus), one extraordinary man waged a long and lonely battle in defence of a true interpretation. He was a bishop called Athanasius.

organisation, praying to the saints becomes as natural as keeping in touch with the relatives! Besides, we could hardly say we honour God fully if we were to ignore those who have served the Church so faithfully and who are especially close to the risen Christ.

## How far does a Catholic have to take all this 'saint' business?

Still with us? If you're not someone who likes a lot of company, you may be feeling a little crowded by all this talk of saints! Yes, the saints really are a family affair!

Sceptical? Perhaps you know a Catholic who appears to get a bit carried away with a devotion to a particular saint.

The Church has always taught that

some degree of devotion to the saints is good and useful. There are no strict obligations regarding saints, apart from a healthy reverence and respect for them as members of our faith family. By way of analogy, one might say: You might not be obliged to try Aunt Helen's cooking every week, but at least appreciate the example of hospitality she offers the family! It is possible to embrace the Catholic community without having a liking for a particular devotional practice employed to honour a saint. What is important, however, is that a Catholic recognises that, as part of this faith community which believes in the risen Christ, we share a life with God far beyond our earthly existence. The saints attest to and call us to the promise of that life.

Sure, there have been and always will be Catholics who harbour

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As time went on and the Church became an established part of society, and therefore prone to all the societal trappings of wealth and power, people came to admire saints who displayed a spirit of poverty and a love for the poor. St Francis of Assisi, for instance, was a young man who challenged the status quo by giving away all his inherited wealth and embarking on a lifestyle of simplicity and poverty. St Clare followed suit.

Our own Australian saint, Mary MacKillop, an educator for the poor, also attests to this recurring theme of poverty upheld by the Church.

Then there were the evangelising saints, the ones who attracted droves of people into the Catholic community. St Paul was especially significant at a time when the Church came to realise that the Gospel was not just for the Jews but for all peoples of the world. He toiled and travelled tirelessly – despite imprisonment, shipwreck and persecution – to preach the Gospel. Nor must we forget the great women of the early Church, whose households were key centres of evangelisation. One of the first evangelists was a disciple called Mary. It was to her that the risen Christ first appeared and the task of proclaiming his resurrection to the apostles was entrusted.

St Dominic had a way with words and founded the preaching Order of Dominicans.

St Ignatius, the Spanish soldier whose long convalescence from a wound leg led to a profound conversion, founded the Jesuits, a great missionary order with a special allegiance to the Pope.

Relentless zeal is a common thread in all the saints. Even St Therese of Lisieux, a cloistered Carmelite sister who lived only 24 years, had an extraordinary missionary heart that led her to pray constantly for people all over the world.

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## Stories

### Insight

'For months after my mother's untimely death, I felt agitated, lost. Then one night I dreamt about her. She was standing there with a smile saying, "All's well with me now. But, oh, it must be so hard for you and your father." Then I woke. After that I felt more peaceful, more "connected" with her. The "communion of saints" was just words to me before, but now I think I understand a little more.' (Grace)

### Telling it like it is

'They say these days that youth think about death a lot. But when I was young, death seemed so remote. It didn't really have much bearing on my daily life. The older I get, the more it dawns on me: life is so short and eternity is...forever. Sometimes this fills me with wonder, relief. At other times, it scares me, and I feel panicky that I'm not making the most of the "now" of life. The communion of saints helps to make sense of these feelings and to orientate my life in a peaceful way: serious about the present, but always looking with hope and trust towards the future I cannot see.' (Jack)



superstitious approaches to saints. The power and love of God is far greater than any human attempts at ritual and prayer, so we must not attribute compelling influence to any devotional practice. Realistically, however, the problem of superstition among Catholics today is not nearly as great as its opposite: a lack of awareness of

our ancestors in faith and of realities beyond our earthly existence.

The saints are with us and for us. They are close to God and draw us close to God too.

So don't get hung up on Aunt Helen's cooking... just enjoy the warmth of her invitation!

## And what about Mary?

One thing that often strikes an outsider to the Catholic Church is the number of statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary is often referred to as 'Queen of the Saints'. Undoubtedly we honour her and pray to her more than all the other saints because of her unique place in the story of Christianity. In fact, so significant is her role, that we have chosen to introduce the Catholic relationship to Mary under a separate topic (see Leaflet No 16).

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Reform has also been a major concern of many saints. St Teresa of Avila lived in a time of great change and turmoil in the Church. Her response was to reform her own life and the community within which she lived. In a time of political tension, Catherine of Siena strove boldly and astutely to defend the Pope.

It is significant that in very recent times, as western society struggles to come to grips with issues of sexuality, respect for life, and widespread marriage breakdown, the Pope has called on Catholic communities everywhere to nominate married couples for the process of canonisation.

Perhaps what we can conclude from this brief overview is that saints come in all shapes and sizes, personalities and backgrounds. In fact, there's a saint for everyone. You might ask yourself: Or those saints mentioned in this leaflet, who most sparks my imagination. You can find out more about their lives at a Catholic library or bookshop, or by asking a Catholic friend.

## Your Story

### Ponder

'We can't really begin living until we have accepted the inevitability of our death'. What thoughts and emotions does this statement evoke in you?

### Discuss

What reactions do you harbour towards the Christian conviction about life and death.

### Share

Share with a good friend some of your memories and feelings about a loved one who has died. What feelings of connection and / or distance do you experience now in that relationship?

### Act

Visit the grave of a loved one who has died and spend some time reflecting upon, not only the value of their earthly life, but the new life which they share with God now. If it is not possible to make a visit, make

use of a special photograph.

### Pray

God of everlasting life, lead us into the fullness of your love, now and forever, Amen.

### People to talk to

If possible, speak with a faithful Catholic who displays a loving awareness of the presence of a spouse, friend or family member who has died.

Approach a priest or parishioner and ask them to tell you the story of the patron saint of their particular parish.

### Places to visit

Visit a Catholic parish church or Cathedral to view the statues and other visible signs of devotions to saints. What saints are represented? What does this tell you about the 'personality' of the parish? Check the back of the Church for literature about the saints.

Published by

### CATHOLIC ENQUIRY CENTRE

80 Albion St, Surry Hills, NSW 2010. Tel (02) 9211 7416. Address correspondence to: PO Box 287, Darlinghurst, NSW. 2010.

Copyright: *The Australian Episcopal Conference of the Roman Catholic Church, 1994 (ACN 000 665 958)*

Nihil Obstat: Rev B. Byron, D.D., M.Th.

Imprimatur: + Cardinal Edward Bede Clancy, Archbishop of Sydney

Date: Sydney, NSW, 29/7/94

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