

### What I ask of my saints

*Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship ...: Give us grace to follow your blessed saints, that we may come to those joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you.*

To whom much is given, much is asked. Ask not what you can do for your saints, but what your saints can do for you. Derek Olsen writes, "I understand perfectly well the banality of modern life. What I ask of my saints is the capacity to crack open reality and reveal to me the numinous life of God hidden within it. *What I ask of my saints is the capacity to crack open reality and reveal God within it.*"

So I'll begin by asking a dumb question: what exactly is a saint? Is a saint anyone who has been baptized, as St. Paul's letters would suggest? Or is a saint someone like Francis, Columba, Hildegard or Martin Luther King, someone whose heroic or even miraculous witness went far beyond simply being a good example?

The answer of course is both. I think of a saint as someone who is so connected to their creator through their faith, their prayers or their courageous action that the eternal presence of God breaks into the world through their very being. Saints don't simply make history, they are the people who break us out of the world's history and show us something of the Kingdom of God.

But how do we as a church come to figure out who deserves to be singled out as one of those special saints? What does our Anglican heritage teach us about holiness?

I remember being asked once at coffee hour a question that I should have known, but didn't: how does the Episcopal Church get its saints? Is there a shared common of saints among churches, meaning that we generally accept what the Roman Catholic church says about who's a saint? Or do we have our own way of going about that?

Before I go way back in time to answer that question, I want to go a bit more recently, to 1979 and the creation of our current Book of Common Prayer. For those of you familiar with the older book from 1928, you know that our liturgies were refreshed by more contemporary language. But the deeper theological anchor of our prayer book, which means then the anchor of our whole church life together, was the recovery of a baptismal ecclesiology: the saints and ministers of the church are not the priests and the prophets, but the whole people of God. An article in the Anglican Theological Review reminded me that sainthood is "the

provenance not just of priests and deacons, not just missionaries, but people from across the spectrum of human work and life, enabled by the necessary sacrament of baptism to perform the reconciling ministry of Christ in the world.”

That means, according to that article, that “the whole people of God, mutually participating in the life of Christ, are understood as the members of the communion of Saints. *At the same time, there exist exemplary members of the people of God singled out for liturgical commemoration.*” We are blessed with the examples of holy men and women, an honor roll of saints who show us what a full-bodied transformation can really look like. But how do we decide who those people are, and what does that say about us?

When we think of how you make a saint, we naturally go to the saints of old and the saints making headlines. The Roman Catholic church has recently “canonized” Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul – I use those quotations not out of any sense of disrespect, but to point out that the Anglican church has little sense of that kind of process. “Canonize” is a verb unknown to us, in part because it would seem to undermine our baptismal ecclesiology (we are saints by baptism, not by committee). Believe it or not, our Anglican church is at its most authentic when we are modest and humble about such things. I think that it’s significant that in the Episcopal Church, no bishop, committee, or convention has the power to declare someone a saint.

And yet, there is still something numinous about sainthood that shapes who we are. That’s the pesky Anglican middle way again. As Episcopalians we are less animated by the questions, “Is he a saint? Shouldn’t she be a saint? And how’d that guy get to be a saint?” than by the question, how is our common life shaped and grounded by the communion of saints, both those in the pews with us and those whose heroic witness shattered our comfort and changed our lives?

We’ve been asking this question for centuries. It was at the heart of the English reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the first prayer book cast off the invocation of pretty much every saint. The veneration of the saints had given way to worship of them, and worship had given way to partying more than faithful piety, so the commemoration of saints was reduced to just the apostles, the gospel writers, and Mary. Those feast days were written in red and given readings for a celebration of the Eucharist (hence the term “Red Letter Days”). Over the next decade a handful of saints were brought back in, but only as “black letter days,” meaning you can remember them, but not as a Eucharistic celebration. This list of feast days travelled the Atlantic and made up the Episcopal calendar until the mid-1940’s, when our church sought to renew our calendar of feasts by consulting other Anglican church traditions, the Eastern Orthodox churches and

the Roman Catholic church. Then in 2003 we again sought a revision that consulted Lutherans, Methodists, and church historians, asking more intentionally than ever, who have we been missing?

Notice that there's no canonization, no seeking of a verification of miracles, but rather a wide-ranging discernment of what Christian Holiness looks like. These folks are "extraordinary, even heroic, servants of God...after the example of Jesus Christ." Their stories represent "the completion in death of a particular Christian's living out of the promises of baptism." These followers of Jesus witnessed in their particular time and place but did so in a way that was timeless and holds meaning for us in all places.

So that's a hint of how you get to be, if not a saint, but singled out for commemoration in the communion of saints. But you know what? That isn't quite enough for me. That seems to be lacking something of the eternal, of the miraculous presence of God in the lives of those particular people who, in their time, lived and breathed the faith of Jesus. *I understand well the banality of modern life. What I ask of my saints is the capacity to crack open reality and reveal to me the numinous life of God hidden within it.*

And in fact, this is the very vision of sainthood that shapes our worship and our church's life together. Saints are not just the Christians who made the honor roll. Saints are the ones who died in the faith, but didn't stop loving the world and loving Jesus when they died. They are a present part of our eternal reality, as alive in the kingdom of God as they were when they lived in the world, and they indeed pray for us today. Read the catechism on p. 862: *The communion of Saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.* When we gather around the altar, we are joined in song by all the saints. Consider one of the prayers read at burial: *O God, the King of Saints, we praise you for your (righteous) servants who have finished their course in your faith and fear, known and unknown, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs; and we pray that, encouraged by their examples, aided by their prayers, and strengthened by their fellowship, we may also be partakers of their inheritance of the saints in light.*

Encouraged by their examples, aided by their prayers, and strengthened by their fellowship. The examples of the saints, we knew about. But our church is also grounded on the present prayers and the sacred fellowship of the saints who have died. They are raised with Jesus, though we know from their stories that long before their death they'd already begun to move into the fullness of life in Christ.

So who are the saints? We are the saints, of course, gathered around a table alongside the followers of Jesus who throughout history have carried the church. But saints are more than that. Derek Olsen, like us, asks a lot of his saints, because we all need a brighter vision of the eternal than our cynical and broken world can offer. Olsen tells us that saints are everything we need them to be, if we have eyes to see:

Saints are our elders in the faith. They are mirrors of the light of Christ. They are present intercessors, praying for us with Jesus, even though to us they have died. They are and have been the pillars of the church, known and unknown, those alive and those who have long since entered the nearer presence of God, whose lives and prayers have kept the faith alive.

To be a Christian is to be encouraged by the examples of the Saints, to aided by their prayers, and strengthened by their fellowship. In their lives we see the contours of holiness, the shape of what God envisions for the world, and for each one of us.

*The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, NC,  
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