

Evidently a sense of humor can endure even to the grave. Here are some epitaphs Joan Hacket: Go Away – I'm asleep. *** One simply says: Here lies an Atheist. All dressed up and no place to go. *** Another: Dang – It's dark down here! *** And yet another: I came here without being consulted and leave without my consent. *** This one from a man who apparently had some conflict with his wife: I finally know something you don't! *** A man who made a play on his name: Here lies John Yeast. Pardon me for not rising. And my favorite: Katherine Phelps Brown Iverson – Sterling Hollinshead Iverson, jr. We finally found a place to park in Georgetown.

First a bit of background on this day. The veneration of the saints began with honors paid to those who died for Christ in the Roman persecutions. Veneration of the martyrs can be traced back to the second century, but by the fourth century there was already in place a calendar of saints' feast days which honored their *dies natalis*, literally their 'birth day' – which was the day of their death – the day they were birthed into heaven. There were pilgrimages to their burial places and traditions seeking their intercession. It is worthwhile to remember that well into the Middle Ages, the most important honor enjoyed by the popes was in their role as protector and custodian of the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul. To this day, bishops from all over the world make a pilgrimage to Rome every 5 years to report on the state of life in their diocese. It is called an *ad limina* visit, 'to the edge' of the tombs of Peter and Paul.

The naming of the saints in the liturgy is not a historical adornment but a theological claim – namely, that the veneration of the saints included those who are not known by name but who 'sleep in Christ.' The tradition reflects the full sense of the church as a living reality beyond those who are alive at any given moment. This table we gather at stretches back 2000 years to the past – and for as far as the future. It joins heaven and earth. We also join 'angels and saints,' as the liturgy states.

When the Roman persecutions ended in the early fourth century, the veneration of the saints did not end. Now ascetics, monks, great pastoral bishops, holy women and men were honored for their outstanding imitation of Christ and as those who provided the church with new models of holiness. St. Athanasius, in his famous book on the monk Antony, caught the continuity between the old and the new well when he observed that Antony was a martyr every day of his life. Such outstanding figures were honored in their lifetime and venerated after their death.

In pre-modern cultures the space between our world and that of the spiritual was extremely porous. Saints were considered to be not only great figures of faith but also ready aides before the throne of God and powerful conduits of grace, healing and help. Their relics were places of power. Their shrines and churches were centers of prayer and a place where miracles not only happened – but were expected. Pilgrimage to their shrines was a common part of medieval culture and a frequent metaphor for the Christian life itself. Both Dante and Chaucer, in their respective masterworks, set their stories within the language of pilgrimage.

It continues to fascinate me that every year, millions of young people walk the CAMINO, an ancient pilgrim way that leaves from places in Spain, Portugal, France, Switzerland and Italy – and ends at the shrine of St. James in Compostela, Spain. The power – and lure – of the saints endures to this very day. (Help from Lawrence S. Cunningham, "United in Happiness," AMERICA, February 23, 2004, p. 12)

Second, so what about us? We need these models. My refrain to today's psalm could be (sing) "The Lord is my shepherd – but I still whine!" The saints who have gone before us and the saints among us do not sit around and complain all the time, which is what whining is, which is why we need to spend some time among saints. And all saints includes ALL saints – people we have known in our lives who have challenged us to be better – both by their word and example. We can find them without too much trouble. Teachers and grandparents, coaches and mentors and uncles and aunts who have taken an interest in us and pushed us to be all that we could be as disciples of Christ. Look for older women and men who have suffered a lot and who seem to ooze love out of every pore. Their every other sentence contains, "thanks be to God," or "I'm so grateful." (Adapted from Brett C. Hoover and Frank Sabbate, SoundBYTE Spirituality: sayings to awaken faith, p. 113)

To fully appreciate the saints – and the very Catholic tradition we share – is to recognize the power of paradox. We need to try to understand the issues underlying their exotic styles of holiness. Which calls us to humility as we recognize that creation does not revolve around us. We must also keep our eyes open for the saints of our own culture. Their witness will be close enough to our concerns, or what should be our concerns, to leave us uncomfortable with our spiritual compromises. Here again, we are called to humility. God has contemporary witnesses other than ourselves. They are not even all Catholic or even Christian. They are young as well as old. If any of us ever think that God does not take young people seriously, we need to remember David before Goliath, Jeremiah who complained that he was too young, Mary, who was astonished by an angelic visitation, and I'll have an example of a 15-year-old at the end of this homily. God will see the divine will done, whether or not we have a part in it.

By their commitment and generosity, the saints stand in judgment on the smallness and self-absorption of so much of our society. They invite us to embody a truly passionate spirituality. They insist on God's reality and the need for reconciliation and justice. The saints call us away from the consumer lifestyles and the flood of media images into what A.M. Allchin calls "the kingdom of love and knowledge." They demonstrate that the gospel is worth dying for, even worth living for. The saints "put us in our place" by demonstrating who it is we were created to be. (WEAVINGS, Jan-Feb 2005, p. 29-30)

Third, there is no magic about becoming a saint. It requires discipline. And discipline is motor oil for the soul. There is no accomplishment in any field without practice, and practice requires discipline. This is just as true with our faith and spirituality as it is soccer, study or music. To really become whole – that is HOLY – people – we need prayer, reflection on our lives, spiritual reading, tithing, and worship with others. Regularly. (Hoover and Sabatte, IBID., p. 51)

The path that leads to the authentic life, the holy life, is not a secret path. The path to holiness is well worn. For 2000 years men and women of all ages, from all walks of life and every social class, have been walking this path. If you came to me and told me you were going on a journey to a place you had never been before, I would advise you to travel with a guide. If you had to choose a guide, you wouldn't choose someone who had never been to where you wanted to go. You would choose an expert, someone who has made the journey before.

The spiritual life is a long and difficult journey, and we are all pilgrims on this path. There are many men and women who have gone before us who are willing to serve as our guides as we try to make this journey. Their stories provide a living legacy of spiritual wisdom. If we seek their counsel in the wisdom of their life stories, we discover that they have faced and conquered many of the snares and pitfalls that seek to trip us up along the way. If we open our hearts to their stories, we will learn from their successes and failures,

and they will teach us and inspire us to become all we can be. (Matthew Kelly, REDISCOVERING CATHOLICISM: p. 77-78)

I came across something in my reading about saints this week that asked whether or not there was a patron saint of the internet. Which led me to discover a young Italian boy who was just beatified this month in Assisi. He is likely to become the first millennial saint. Carlo Acutis was born in London and died in 2006 in Monza Italy – at the age of 15. When he was only 7, he became fascinated with computer programming, and in the months before his death from leukemia, he created a website that documented Eucharistic miracles around the world. He was a kid who grew up playing POKEMON, lived in a faith-filled and happy home, and did well in school. His school principal said that he didn't really stand out from the other kids – except that he was very devout. Here are a few quotes from the kid who just might become the patron saint of the internet. "Outside God is noise, turmoil, quarrel, war. With God, everything is order, everything is in order." *** "To always be close to Jesus, that is my life plan." *** "The infinite is our homeland. Heaven has been waiting for us forever." *** And my favorite – when he received communion, He would say, "Jesus, have a seat. Make yourself at home."

I'm so grateful to be Catholic. I'm so grateful that a young man like this has been already titled "Blessed Carlo Acutis." I'm grateful for all the saints. And I'm grateful for all of you. Remember that St. Paul referred to his fellow Christians as saints, members of the household of God. It reminds us who we are called to be. So HAPPY FEAST DAY TO YOU, SAINTS ALL. Amen.