

HAPPY ALL SAINTS DAY

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Even if you're a believer, you may think that the saints have nothing to do with your own life. You've no doubt read some of those gory stories of men and women having their eyes plucked out, or tongues cut out, or bodies devoured by lions in the Coliseum, not to mention stories of their being beheaded, drawn and quartered and so on. One of the most well-known icons in the Catholic Church is that of St. Lucy, the third-century martyr pictured holding her eyeballs on a silver platter, the symbol of her own gruesome end.

"Ugh," you might think. *"I'm supposed to emulate that?"*

If you're squeamish and can't bear to think of the sufferings that the martyrs endured for our faith (and I haven't even mentioned the fate of **St. Jean de Brébeuf**) you may instead think of saints who led ultra-pious lives, like **St. Thérèse of Lisieux**, the 19th-century Carmelite nun who refused to say a harsh word to anyone; or ultra-ascetic lives like **St. Simon Stylites**, the fifth-century Christian who lived atop a pillar for years on end; or ultra-active lives like **Blessed Teresa of Calcutta aka Mother Teresa**, who...well, you know what she did.

And you might still ask: *What do all these hyperreligious lives have to do it me?*

The short answer is: *a lot.*

When you read the complete stories of the lives of these saints, and shift your focus from the gruesome details of their martyrdoms and their more extreme ascetical practices, you will meet people who can teach you about being who you are. For each saint lived out his or her call to follow God in an individual way, tailored to their own personalities; and while some of aspects of their biographies seem odd to us today (like any life before, say, 1900 does), if you dig beneath the surface of their often-puzzling lives, you could find something that you might want to emulate: generosity, charity and love.

Their lives are far richer than tales of bloody deaths or overblown feats of prayer. They were human, after all, and had to face the same struggles we do. For example, they had difficulties with their families: St. Thomas Aquinas' family was so opposed to his entering the Dominican order in the 13th century that they locked him up in a jail. They suffered from physical ailments: St. Francis of Assisi spent a great deal of his later life battling terrible eye infections. And they faced difficulties from the religious organizations to which they belonged: St. Ignatius of Loyola, the 16th-century founder of the Jesuits, was several times thrown into jail by the Inquisition, which was suspicious of his ways of praying.

The saints were – and here is something we usually forget – human. (*"Just like us,"* as the celebrity mags say about their subjects.) All of them tried the best they could to find a way to God during their own times, in their own circumstances and given their own limited worldviews. That goes a little way to explaining some of the practices that they undertook, which to our minds seem completely outlandish. **St. Aloysius Gonzaga**, a young 16th-century Jesuit, for example, maintained strict *"custody of the eyes,"* which meant that he avoided looking women in the face to preserve his modesty.

Ridiculous? Of course. But it wasn't seen so in his time. Which begs the obvious question: *What practices, religious or otherwise, of our time will look absurd in another 300 years?*

Oh, really? Nothing you do is going to look silly, ridiculous or even offensive in 300 years? Don't be so sure. It's probably best not to dismiss a saint who, after all, was a creature of his time and place and of the mores of that time and place. Like we all are.

WHAT PRAYING FOR THE DEAD DOES FOR THE LIVING

By Fr. Bill Ashbaugh

He prayed for his wife and came to believe that she was with God. He hopes to join her someday.

Many years ago, I visited a man in the hospital. He was going through a very difficult time with grief. His wife had recently died of cancer. He was very lonely and especially troubled. He wondered if his wife was all right. They had lived good lives, but they were not perfect.

As a part of his working through grieving for his wife and responding to his faith that his prayers could still help her if she needed it, the man offered prayers for his wife to God.

The idea of praying for the dead goes back even before the time of Christ. There was a commander of an army of Jews named Judas Maccabeus who realized some of his soldiers who died during battle had amulets of other gods on their bodies. This was a sin, and so Judas realized that he needed to do something for them. Scripture says he "then took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. In doing this, he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection of the dead in view; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death. ... Thus, he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed of this sin." (2 Maccabees 12:43-46).

One of the corporal works of mercy is to bury the dead. For us, that means weeping with those who weep. It means praying for those who have died that they might enjoy the gift of eternal life with Christ. When it is a family member or a friend, it is especially important for us to grieve their loss and remember them to God. God does not forget them and wills our prayers be effective in helping them complete their journey to God.

We call the state and process of purification after death purgatory.

The catechism teaches us that:

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. (CCC 1030)

From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. (CCC 608)

The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead: Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them. (CCC 609).

It is good spiritual fitness to pray and offer sacrifices for the dead.

Let me finish by telling you what happened to the man in the hospital. He shared with me that one night, while he was sleeping, he had a dream in which his wife came into the room and waltzed across the room. She had always loved to dance in life. She came to him and gave him a kiss, and said, "I am fine, my darling."

The man woke from the dream. It was so powerful he said he could still feel her presence there with him. He was filled with great peace of mind after this, and had been given the gift to let go of his worry about her. He believed she was with God, and he continued to offer prayers for her and himself that one day he could be worthy to join her. His faith in the mercy of God and the power of Jesus' resurrection had been restored.