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Like a Great Symphony

For the feast of All Saints on November 1, here is an article about honoring the saints throughout the Church's liturgical year.

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In Michelangelo's masterpiece, the Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel, we see Christ in the center seemingly governing the universe with a gesture of his arm. At his side is our Lady, whose eyes look mercifully on her children as they come before the

supreme Judge. Surrounding these two figures are a great number of people, saints from the Old and New Testament, martyrs and apostles, who look steadily at the Savior.

This way of representing the Last Judgement enjoys a long tradition in Christian art. In the Middle Ages it was common to find on the facade of churches and cathedrals, and also sometimes inside, the figure of Christ surrounded by saints: men and women, young and old, learned doctors and simple manual workers, kings and popes, monks and soldiers, virgins and married men and women, of all milieus and places, of all races and cultures. This immense multitude was frequently accompanied by angels playing musical instruments, like a great orchestra performing a beautiful symphony directed by the composer and maestro, our Lord Jesus Christ. Benedict XVI compared the saints to

a great “ensemble of musical instruments who, despite their individuality, raise up to God one great symphony of intercession, of thanksgiving and praise.”[1] Since each is an expert on a different instrument, the result is a richly varied sound that is always new, performed throughout the liturgical year as we celebrate their memorials. Through the Communion of the Saints the blessed in heaven form a part of our life. We are united to the Church in Heaven “where souls are triumphing with our Lord.”[2] Our liturgical worship enables us to unite what we believe, live, celebrate and pray into a coherent whole.

Riches of Christian holiness

Throughout history countless men and women have put into practice Jesus’ words: “*Estote ergo vos perfecti, sicut Pater vester caelestis*

perfectus est”; *be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*[3] The rich charisms of the Holy Spirit, peoples’ different ways of being and the broad spectrum of situations in which Christians live, have made it possible for our Lord’s command to be embodied in many different ways. “Every state of life leads to holiness, always! In your home, on the street, at work, at church, in that moment and in your state of life, the path to sainthood has been opened.”[4]

Saints attract in a wonderful way! The life of a person who has struggled towards identification with Christ is a great “apologia” for the faith. Their powerful light shines in the midst of the world. If sometimes it seems that human history is governed by the kingdom of darkness, possibly this is due to these lights shining less brightly or in fewer number. “These world crises are crises of saints,”[5] as Saint

Josemaria said. The contrast between their light-filled existence and the darkness around them may be great. In fact, many of them suffered misunderstandings or hidden or even open persecution, as happened to the Word Incarnate: *the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light.*^[6] Despite all this, experience shows the great appeal the saints have. In many sectors of society, people admire the witness of a strong and completely coherent Christian life. The lives of the saints show us how being close to our Lord fills the heart with peace and joy, and how we can spread serenity, hope and optimism around us, while being open to the needs of others, especially the least fortunate.

Devotion to the saints

The unfathomable riches of Christian holiness have been continually recalled and meditated upon by the

Church in the light of God's Word. The Liturgy lovingly celebrates each year those who have passed through the world, like Jesus, *doing good*,^[7] being bright lamps for their brothers and sisters, helping them to be happy on this earth and in the future life. The dates for their liturgical commemorations normally correspond to the day of their death or *dies natalis*, the day on which they are born to a new life, the life in heaven. On other occasions, the date recalls certain noteworthy moments in their life, especially dates related to the reception of the sacraments.

Saint Josemaria had great devotion to the saints. "What love was Teresa's! What zeal was Xavier's! What a wonderful man was Saint Paul! Ah, Jesus, well I... I love you more than Paul, Xavier and Teresa!"^[8] The Sacred Liturgy is a privileged place where we can grow in love for these celestial intercessors

and feel close to them, as loving companions on our earthly journey. The Roman Missal brings together the tradition of faith celebrated down through the ages, with formulas of prayers for the Masses of the martyrs, pastors, doctors of the Church, virgins, and holy men and women who reached the fullness of Christian life in a variety of circumstances and states of life. In the majority of cases, these texts contain some common prayers and others that are proper to the day.

Most families normally celebrate in a special way the anniversaries of the more prominent members of the family, the father or mother, the grandparents... This also happens in the family of God, the Church. In addition to the feasts of our Lady, the general calendar includes the *solemnities* of Saint Joseph (March 19), the Birth of John the Baptist (June 24), Saint Peter and Saint Paul

(June 29), and All Saints (November 1). There are also a large number of *feasts* of the saints; besides those of the apostles and evangelists that occur throughout the year, the Church celebrates the feasts of Saint Lawrence (August 10), Saint Stephen the first martyr (December 26), and the Holy Innocents (December 28). Then there are the *memorials*, either free or obligatory. In the Work, besides the feasts of our Lord and our Lady and Saint Joseph, we celebrate with special devotion the feast of the Holy Cross; those of the holy Archangels and Apostles, patrons of the various apostolic works of the Prelature; those of the other apostles and evangelists; and the feast of the Holy Guardian Angles.[9]

As we read in the book of Revelation, the saints form *a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and*

peoples and tongues.[10] This multitude includes the saints of the Old Testament, such as the just man Abel and the faithful patriarch Abraham; those of the New Testament; the many martyrs of the early times of Christianity, and the blessed and saints of all time. This is the great family of God's children, formed by those who model their life under the impulse of the eternal sculptor, the Holy Spirit.

Collects of the Roman Missal

A contemporary French writer says that the saints are like “the colors of the spectrum in relation to the light.” Each one expresses with his or her own tones and radiance the light of divine holiness. It is as though the radiance of Christ's Resurrection, in passing through the prism of mankind, opens up a spectrum of colors as varied as it is fascinating. “When the Church keeps the

memorials of martyrs and other saints during the annual cycle, she proclaims the Paschal mystery in those ‘who have suffered and have been glorified with Christ. She proposes them to the faithful as examples who draw all men to the Father through Christ, and through their merits she begs for God’s favors’ (Vatican II, Const. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 104).”[11]

In the formulas of Masses for saints in the Roman Missal, the Church expresses her prayer in words that help us to consider the various colors in this spectrum of life. On each of these days, there is at least a collect proper to the saint that the priest recites in the opening rite immediately before the Liturgy of the Word. This brief prayer condenses the character of the celebration.[12] In a few words it reminds us of the aspect of God’s

holiness that shines forth most brightly in the saint we commemorate that day. Often it begins by recalling some facet of the history of salvation, in particular the Mystery of Christ. And it usually urges the Christian people to seek the intercession of that saint for some area of their life.

The content of the collects is quite rich and varied. Thus, for example, on the memorial of Saint John Fisher and Saint Thomas More (June 22), we ask to confirm with the witness of our life the faith we profess (what Saint Josemaria would call unity of life); or we ask to have apostolic zeal like that of Saint Francis Xavier (December 3); or to live the mystery of Christ especially by contemplating his Passion as did Saint Catherine of Siena (April 29); or to have our heart enkindled with the fire of the Holy Spirit on the day of Saint Philip Neri (May 26). On other occasions we ask

for gifts and graces for the Church: the fruitfulness of the apostolate on the memorial of Saint Charles Luwanga and his martyr companions (June 3); to have shepherds to the measure of Christ's heart, on the feast of Saint Ambrose (December 7); or to trustingly open our hearts to Christ's grace, as Saint John Paul II asked of us (October 22). On the memorial of Saint Juan Diego (December 9) we contemplate our Lady's love for her people, and on that of Saint Agatha (February 5) we are reminded of how pleased God is with the virtue of purity.

These examples, which could be multiplied many times, show us that the prayers we offer on the feasts of the saints are a very rich resource for our personal prayer on that day. They can help us to address our Lord spontaneously with specific phrases during our hours of work and rest that day. Precious gems of unique

beauty, some of these prayers have been prayed for many centuries, like jewels inserted into the liturgical celebrations of Christian Tradition. As we pray them, we are praying as so many generations of Christians have prayed. The memorials and feasts of the saints celebrated throughout the year offer us the opportunity to get to know a bit better these powerful intercessors before the Blessed Trinity, and to “make new friends” in heaven.

Stars of God

The saints, “being touched by God’s word have, as it were, released an explosion of light, through which God’s radiance shines upon our world and shows us the path. The saints are stars of God, by whom we let ourselves be led to him for whom our whole being longs.”^[13] Just as the star from the East guided the Magi to their personal encounter

with Christ, so the saints help us like the North Star in the night sky, to reach the land to which we aspire.

Among the stars that point out the way, the Church has publicly set forth Saint Josemaria and Blessed Alvaro for the devotion of the Christian people. The apostolic zeal and disinterested service to the Church and all souls that so deeply marked the lives of the founder of Opus Dei and his first successor are condensed in the prayers the Church raises up to God on their respective liturgical feastdays. In the first case, the Church implores God the Father that, through the intercession of Saint Josemaria, “we may, through our ordinary work, be formed in the likeness of Jesus your Son and serve the work of redemption with burning love,”[14] and that the celebration of the sacraments may strengthen in us “the spirit of adoption as your children.”[15] In

the collect for Blessed Alvaro we ask that by imitating his example “we may humbly dedicate ourselves to the Church’s saving mission.”[16] Don Alvaro was faithful to the Church and loyally followed Saint Josemaria in spreading the message of the universal call to sanctity and apostolate.

We benefit greatly from earnestly seeking the intercession of Saint Josemaria and Blessed Alvaro so that from heaven they might obtain for us fidelity to our vocation in all the circumstances of our life. By reading their lives, as though a great novel, we learn to be saints in ordinary life. As Saint Bernard reminds us in a homily for the feast of All Saints: “The saints have no need of honor from us, nor does our devotion add anything to their glory. If we venerate their memory, it redounds to our advantage, not theirs. I assure you that, when I think of them, I feel

my heart enkindled by a tremendous yearning.”[17] Hence we can understand the meaning of the honor given to the saints: “looking at the shining example of the saints awakens in us the great longing to be like them, happy to live near God, in his light, in the great family of God’s friends.”[18] Besides, as we go through the year and contemplate the men and women saints of all times and places, we realize that “they were, they are, normal: of flesh, like yours. And they conquered.”[19]

Celebrating the feastdays of the saints forcefully reminds us of the universal call to holiness. Helped by God’s grace, all men and women can correspond fully to the loving invitation to participate in divine Life, each in our specific circumstances. As Pope Francis said: “Often we are tempted to think that sainthood is reserved only to those

who have the opportunity to break away from daily affairs in order to dedicate themselves exclusively to prayer. But it is not so! Some think that sanctity is to close your eyes and to look like a holy icon. No! This is not sanctity! Sanctity is something greater, deeper, which God gives us. Indeed, it is precisely in living with love and offering one's own Christian witness in everyday affairs that we are called to become saints.”[20]

Persons of every condition travel the path of Christian perfection. “There are many Christians who are marvelously holy. There are many mothers who are marvelously, wonderfully holy; there are many fathers who are wonderful. They will have marvelous places in heaven. And laborers and farmers. Where one least expects it, there are vibrant souls.”[21]

How encouraging it is to consider that, as the years go by, there will be

more and more saints who have lived an ordinary life, and whose lives we will celebrate in the Liturgy so they may spur us to deepen our love for Christ in our ordinary daily tasks!

[1] Benedict XVI, *Audience*, 25 April 2012.

[2] Saint Josemaria, Notes taken in a get together, 26 June 1974.

[3] *Mt* 5:48.

[4] Francis, *Audience*, 19 November 2014.

[5] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 301.

[6] *Jn* 3:19.

[7] *Hebr* 10:38.

[8] *The Way*, no. 874

[9] Cf. *De Spiritu*, no. 98.

[10] *Rev* 7:9.

[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1173.

[12] Cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 54.

[13] Benedict XVI, *Homily*, 6 January 2012.

[14] *Collect* for the Mass of Saint Josemaria.

[15] *Postcommunion* of the Mass of Saint Josemaria.

[16] *Collect* for the Mass of Blessed Alvaro.

[17] Saint Bernard, *Sermo 2* in *Opera Omnia Cisterc.* 5, 364.

[18] Benedict XVI, *Homily*, 1 November 2006.

[19] *The Way*, no. 133.

[20] Francis, *Audience*, 19 November 2014.

[21] Saint Josemaria, Notes taken in a get together, 18 May 1970.

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