

# **The Saints: Definitions, Duties, Destiny**

By Greg Witherow

Christians in both high-church Christendom and as well as low-church evangelicalism freely make use of the term “Saint” when discussing great men and women of the faith. References to Saint Paul or Saint Augustine are found across the spectrum of Christian publications. But in reality both Catholics and Protestants have an incomplete understanding of the definition and role of the saint as presented in the New Testament. We will examine the topic here.

## **Who Is A Saint?**

The word saint means “holy one”. Every soul in heaven is a saint, if they have the official Catholic title or not. The Church canonizes souls with the title of Saint (with a capital S) primarily to present the laity with examples of piety and faith. Saint Paul said, “Imitate me<sup>1</sup>” [as he imitates Christ]. The Church says of the Saints; imitate them [as they imitate Christ]. In doing so, the Saint is honored. Additionally, Catholics and Orthodox seek their prayers<sup>2</sup>.

A second category of saints are those Christians on earth (and purgatory). In the New Testament, this is primarily how the term is used. In writing to the church of Ephesus, Saint Paul writes, “To the saints who are in Ephesus”<sup>3</sup>. We should take note of this. For the most part Catholics rarely speak of “saints” in these terms. This is unfortunate. It is always best to adopt Biblical language when describing our faith. Language informs our intellect and changes the way we think and conduct ourselves<sup>4</sup>. An illustration is useful. Imagine if we stopped referring to “the parishioners of Holy Trinity” and instead spoke of “the saints of Holy Trinity”. This is how Saint Paul would address our parish. Such language has an elevating effect.

A third category of saints are the angels. For most of our Protestant brothers, this concept is a foreign one. To speak of Saint Michael the Archangel raises questions in their minds. “Where does that come from?” The letter of Jude provides an answer, where the angels are called saints.

“Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints”<sup>5</sup>

It is true that angels are saints in a different way than Christians are. The work of Christ on the cross and its application to the believer via the Holy Spirit is a very different experience than that of angels. However, the title is shared by both and the Church takes note of it.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:16

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 5:8

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 1:1, New KJV. The word “saints” in this verse is found in the text of the Vulgate and Textus Receptus.

<sup>4</sup> This is why the Roman missal is being updated as of Advent 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Jude 1:14, New King James Version. The Greek word used is translated as either “saint” or “holy one”. In this case the saints (or holy ones) are widely interpreted to be angels. The Reformation Study Bible (Calvinist) says the following: “Saints; probably a reference to the angelic host that will accompany the Lord’s return.” This passage is often cross referenced to Matthew 25:31 where it states Christ will return with his angels. Likewise, the Reformation Study Bible comes to the same conclusion on Zechariah 14:5, where God is said to come with his saints, concluding “These are God’s chosen servants, the angelic host (perhaps humans as well).”

## **Saintly Duties I**

Saint Paul informs the Christians of Corinth of an obligation they have toward each other. In our beknighted times, it is an obligation largely ignored in Christendom.

“Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? ... If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?”<sup>6</sup>

Paul instructs Christians to abstain from taking each other to the secular courts. In our day, few Christians take notice. Exhibit-One are the court battles being waged between the Episcopal church and her break away parishes. Some very nice church property is at stake. Break away Catholic parishes have been known to do the same. Such cases violate the Biblical mindset. Saint Paul claims it would be better to be cheated than to scandalize the Church. Strong words.

## **Saintly Duties II**

In making his case for Christians to stay out of secular courts, Paul inserts two tidbits many Christians are unaware of. Namely, the saints will judge unbelievers and angels on The Big Day.

“Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?”<sup>7</sup>

On Judgment Day God will look to his saints to hand in verdicts on mankind. Likewise we will judge the angels. Which angels is an open question. Using the term “demons” would have cleared things up. If we are to judge only the fallen angels (most likely), it will be to dole out punishments. If in fact we are to judge the good angels (possible), it would be to dole out rewards. God sought Abraham’s council on Sodom. In the future, he will look our way again.

## **Saintly Destiny**

Interestingly, the writer of Hebrews tells us the saints will be elevated above the angels.

For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere, "What is man that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man, that thou carest for him? Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet." Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:1, 4-7. Revised Standard Version

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:2, 3 Revised Standard Version

his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”<sup>8</sup>

The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible footnotes state the following on the above passage.

“The Psalmist (who the writer of Hebrews quotes) marvels that man, so small and frail, was created to share in God’s dominion over the world (Genesis 1:28). The Greek version envisions two distinct stages in this human vocation: man is first made in subordination to the angels, **yet he is destined to be crowned and elevated over the angels.** This vocation is fully realized only in Jesus, who experienced in his human nature both humiliation and subsequent exaltation.”<sup>9</sup>

In the book of Revelation Christ speaks to seven churches. In each message he makes promises to those who persevere. Our futures include the following: Christ will grant each saint to eat of the tree of life in paradise<sup>10</sup>, each saint will be donned with a crown of life<sup>11</sup>, Christ will give each saint a new name known only by God and the recipient<sup>12</sup>, each saint will be given a role in ruling over the nations with a rod of iron<sup>13</sup>, each saint will be clothed with white garments, Christ will announce each saint’s name before the Father and the angels<sup>14</sup>, the persecutors of Christians will bow down at the feet of the saints and publicly acknowledge their righteousness, God will write His name on the believer<sup>15</sup> and give each saint a throne.<sup>16</sup> . This is truly sublime.

### **The Catechism of the Catholic Church**

**823** “The Church ... is held, as a matter of faith, to be unfailingly holy. This is because Christ, the son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is hailed ‘alone holy’, loved the Church as his Bride, giving himself up for her so as to sanctify her; he joined her to himself as his body and endowed her with the gift of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God”. The Church, then, is “the holy People of God”, and her members are called “saints”

**828** By canonizing some of the faithful, i.e., by solemnly proclaiming that they practiced heroic virtue and lived in fidelity to God’s grace, the Church recognizes the power of the Spirit of holiness within her and sustains the hope of believers by proposing the saints to them as models and intercessors. “The saints have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult moments in the Church’s history”. Indeed, “holiness is the hidden source and infallible measure of her apostolic activity and missionary zeal.”

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<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 2:5-9

<sup>9</sup> Comments are found on page 418.

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 2:7

<sup>11</sup> Revelation 2:10. I imagine these crowns will all be different, with the martyrs having the most ornate.

<sup>12</sup> Revelation 2:17. This makes the name very intimate. It’s like a husband and wife sharing secret names.

<sup>13</sup> Revelation 2:26-27

<sup>14</sup> Revelation 3:5. How glorious to have Christ announce your name to the Father with a thunderous roar of “huzzah!” from the angels! Surely no angel will quietly remain in his assigned seat, passively looking on.

<sup>15</sup> Revelation 3:9-12

<sup>16</sup> Revelation 3:21

**946** After confessing “the holy catholic Church”, the Apostles’ Creed adds, “the communion of saints”. In a certain sense this article is a further explanation of the preceding: “What is the Church if not the assembly of all the saints?” **The communion of saints is the Church.**

### **Summary**

Each Christian and angel is by definition a saint. And if the Christian perseveres, he/she will be a saint in heaven forever, whether or not they are canonized with the title “Saint”. A Christian is a saint because he/she is filled with the Holy Spirit and is a new creature in Christ. But often times “they know the lyrics but lack the music” is the way the faith is lived. A faith that is merely a list of rules, a collection of facts, memorized prayers, a Sunday “obligation” and little joy is a trap we must avoid. How so? The following is a proposal.

First, immerse yourself in the Scriptures. **This must be the foundation**<sup>17</sup>. The necessity of this step is proven as every Mass begins with the Liturgy of the Word. This prepares our hearts for the Sacrament and is faithful to Christ’s example on the Road to Emmaus. Christ preached the Word **and only afterwards** revealed himself in the breaking of bread<sup>18</sup>. Have you ever wondered why so many partake of the Eucharist appear to be unchanged? **It is really quite simple.** Sacramental graces roll off many souls because hearts remain unchanged by the Word.

Second, make frequent use of the Sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist. With a proper (mandatory) humility grace is poured into the soul. Third, develop a Marian devotion. To love the parent is to love the child<sup>19</sup>. Done faithfully, these steps (done in turn) will build any saint.

The following is a hymn I grew up with in my evangelical church. Knowing the tune helps, but the words are as true today as the first time I heard my mom and dad singing them in the pew.

### **How Firm A Foundation**

**1.** How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord  
Is laid for your faith in his excellent Word  
What more can he say than to you he hath said  
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

**2.** Fear not I am with thee O be not dismayed  
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid  
I’ll strengthen thee, help thee and cause thee to stand  
Upheld by my righteous omnipotent hand

**3.** When through the deep waters I call thee to go  
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow  
For I will be with thee they troubles to bless  
And I’ll sanctify to the they deepest distress

**4.** When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie  
My grace all sufficient shall be thy supply  
The flame shall not hurt thee I only design  
Thy dross to consume and they gold to refine

**5.** The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose  
I will not, I will not desert to his foes  
That soul though all hell should endeavor to shake  
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!

<sup>17</sup> “To be ignorant of Scripture is to be ignorant of Christ”-Saint Jerome. If true, most Catholics do not know Christ.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Benedict makes this point in his encyclical Verbum-Domini, where he emphasizes the necessity of scripture.

<sup>19</sup>1 John 5:1 states, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.” Revised Standard Version.