

*John Docherty, November 1, 2015*

## **All Saints Day**

We're in an unusual time of the year.

Today is All Saints Day. It's largely a Catholic celebration, though some Protestant Churches do celebrate it as well. It's a day dedicated to the recognition of the saints of the church. In the Catholic Church, that means those who are now in Heaven, in the presence of God. The day is sometimes referred to as All Hallows.

Tomorrow is All Souls Day – a day dedicated to those who have died, but are not yet in Heaven. Again, in the Catholic Church that means those who are in purgatory, being purified in suffering before receiving permission to enter into God's presence. It also, I suppose, includes those who have died but for whom we have no assurance that they are in God's presence – they haven't yet been formally recognized as Saints by the church.

Yesterday was Hallowe'en. All Hallows Eve. All Hallows Evening. Hallows Even. Hallowe'en.

Together, the three days of Hallowe'en, All Saints Day and All Souls Day form a series of linked celebrations that focus on those who have gone before. They're all suffused with a certain somberness born of the fact that they deal with death.

But Hallowe'en and All Souls Day pivot around today, All Saints Day. This is the day that really should be setting the tone for the other two. And this is a less sober celebration. The intent, I think, is to give us a moment to pause and reflect on those faithful who have paved the way for us – those who have lived exemplary Christian lives, and who can serve as models, or inspiration, for the rest of us.

Since the Catholic Church actually has a formal process for identifying those who are Saints, I was curious to know how many Saints are recognized. I was surprised to find out that it's actually difficult to get a firm number. There is no definitive and exhaustive list. Depending on the source you consult, the number can vary from a couple of thousand, to over 10 thousand.

Part of the reason for that is that the formal canonization process was only put into place in the year 1234, by Pope Gregory IX. Prior to that date, saints were

canonized locally by the Bishop of the Diocese, which, generally speaking, was fine, except that it sometimes led to some questionable decisions.

Various Catholic websites are quite open about the embarrassment caused by such things as the canonization by the church in Sweden of "... an imbibing monk who was killed in a drunken brawl ... hardly evidence of martyrdom ...".

Even worse, is the case of St. Guinefort. One Catholic website describes the situation this way : "In rural France, St. Guinefort was venerated as the protector of infants after he saved his master's baby from a snakebite. St. Guinefort was a dog."

And then, in a wonderful example of understatement, the site goes on to state that "... The prospect of venerating dogs ... troubled some church leaders."

I underline the fact that these quotes are taken from Catholic websites, because I don't want to be accused of mocking the Catholic Church on this point. The veneration of saints is serious business in the church, and, in some ways, I think it could be argued that the canonization of saints is a way of affirming the Christian belief that there *is* life after death.

Besides, as I said earlier, one of the reasons saints are venerated in the Catholic Church is to hold up examples of faithful discipleship to others.

And although Anabaptist-Mennonites don't tend to observe dates like All Saints Day, we do have our own version of our list of saints; our own "canonized" faithful.

In preparing for this meditation I thought I might have a quick read through some bios of saints respected by Mennonites.

The Martyrs Mirror.

I ran out of time.

It's a thick book, and it contains a lot of information about a lot of people. Some of those listed are obviously also Catholic saints; certainly those who were martyred in the early decades and centuries after Christ are also Catholic saints.

People like Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Timothy, Andrew, Stephen, ...

But, of course, for us Mennonites, the idea of sainthood is not limited to those who've gone before. When Paul writes in Romans that he is going to Jerusalem to bring aid to the saints, he's not talking about James, and John, and Peter and the rest of the twelve disciples – he's talking about all of those who make up the community of believers in Jerusalem, from the most notable, to the most modest.

He's talking about all of those who've been made holy by their commitment to Christ.

And while this "Martyrs Mirror" is a compendium of stories of those who gave their lives for the faith, the underlying assumption is that we are all saints; all holy; because of our faith – or perhaps, for Mennonites, because of our faithfulness.

We're not big on creeds in the Mennonite Church, but one of the earliest statements that defines the faith of Christianity is the Apostles Creed.

It dates from as early as the fourth century, and is translated into English in a couple of slightly different ways, but basically reads as follows :

**I BELIEVE** in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.  
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit  
and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again.  
He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
*(the holy catholic church, meaning the holy universal church, not specifically the Roman church)*  
the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

“... I believe in the communion of saints ...”

It's a bit of a tricky statement.

“... the communion of saints ...”

The word ‘communion’ here suggests a unique kind of relationship among believers. It certainly involves the idea of community; a sharing of lives; an interdependency of some kind.

But it also has a level of meaning that extends beyond simply being a part of a group. I think this idea of the communion of saints carries with it a sense that we are somehow, not just part of a group, but part of each other. I am who I am because of each of you. And each of you is who you are because of everyone else.

And I am a part of this circle because of the influence of a number of people in my life, as are you. We didn't just wander into this circle, we're here because of people who have drawn us in – either specifically into this circle at MFM, or, more broadly, into the circle of faith of which MFM is a part.

Or, even if we did just wander in to this particular circle, we continue to be here because of the lives lived together.

Some years ago I was invited to speak at a church, and, because it was also a communion Sunday, I was asked to lead them in communion. So ... I asked them to put their chairs in a circle, and pass the bread and juice around, handing the plate and cup from person to person.

I suggested that as they took a piece of bread, they should name someone who was instrumental in bringing them into the circle of faith.

I also suggested that as they took a cup of grape juice, they should name someone they would like to see join the circle of faith.

I nearly started a riot.

Some were very upset, because they felt that what I was suggesting would take the focus of communion away from Jesus; that nobody else had died for their salvation.

That certainly wasn't my intent.

My intent was to make the point that our circle of faith is much bigger than the 20 or 30 or 50 people we rub shoulders with on Sunday morning.

My intent was to try to acknowledge that God works through each of us in very personal, and very human ways, and that all of us owe a debt to those whose faithfulness helped give birth to faith in our own lives.

I don't think acknowledging the role of others in our lives diminishes the role of God in our lives.

Quite the opposite.

I think acknowledging the fact that God *is* at work in the lives of those around us underscores our appreciation for the extent to which God is at work in our own lives.

So I'd like to ask you to consider doing something during our sharing time – and I hope it doesn't start a riot.

I'd like to ask you, on this All Saints Day, to perhaps just mention someone who has had a positive influence in your own pilgrimage; someone who helped make it possible for you to be sitting here today, in this circle of faith; someone who connects you to the broader body of Christ.