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## *Why Saints?*

BY MARK ZAEGEL, CAMPUS MINISTER

### *Why Saints?*

Ok, that's a fair question. What relevance do they really have to our lives anyway? Sometimes, it seems like they're just a bunch of lifeless statues or stained-glass windows. And what do we need them for if we have God and Jesus to turn to?? Well, let's back up a second...

### *What are Saints?*

Let's start there. A **saint** is a term used to refer to someone who is a holy person. "Holy" means to be dedicated or set apart for a sacred purpose. They are exceptionally virtuous people whose lives are remembered for the sake of inspiring others. There are over 10,000 saints from throughout our history.

### *When did all this start?*

By the year 100 A.D., Christians were honoring other Christians who had died, asking for their intercession. The practice came from a long-standing tradition in the Jewish faith of honoring prophets and holy people with shrines. The first saints were martyrs, people who had given up their lives for their faith amid persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire.

*"For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self."*

*-Thomas Merton*

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## Who makes the call?

The Catholic Church does not *make* someone a saint. What the Church does has no effect on these “saints” in the afterlife. For the saint, it is like we are giving them a medal of honor for their heroic action. It doesn’t make them any more awesome than they were before the Church honored them. Rather, the Church *recognizes* someone as a saint for their particularly virtuous life. And it holds them up for us to turn to for wisdom and inspiration.

## Why do Catholics pray to saints?

Well, first off, we don’t pray *to* saints; we pray *with* them. Have you ever asked anyone to pray for you when you were having a hard time? Why did you choose to ask that person? You may have chosen someone you could trust, or someone who understood your problem because they’ve been there themselves, or someone who seems close to God. Those are the same reasons we ask saints to pray for us in times of trouble.

## Aren’t all the statues and paintings idolatry?

Look at the pictures of your loved ones around your home, on your phone, or in your wallet. Why do you keep these particular pictures? It may be that you carry those pictures to remind you of people you love, to help you feel that they’re close to you when you’re not together, or to share with people you meet. But you probably wouldn’t say that you worship them. Those are some of the same reasons we have statues and pictures of saints. Seeing a picture of Saint Francis of Assisi joyfully surrounded by animals might remind us of how much he loved God’s creation and encourage us to live with that joyful attitude of gratitude today.

## What about patron saints?

Patron saints are chosen as special protectors or guardians over areas of life. These areas can include occupations, illnesses, churches, countries, causes -- anything that is important to us. The earliest records show that people and churches were named after apostles and martyrs as early as the fourth century. Recently, the popes have named patron saints but patrons can be chosen by other individuals or groups as well. Patron saints are often chosen today because an interest, talent, or event in their lives overlaps with the special area. For example, Francis of Assisi loved nature and so he is patron of ecologists. Francis de Sales was a writer and so he is patron of journalists and writers. Clare of Assisi was named patron of television because one Christmas when she was too ill to leave her bed she saw and heard Christmas Mass -- even though it was taking place miles away. Angels can also be named as patron saints. A patron saint can help us when we follow the example of that saint's life and when we ask for that saint's intercessory prayers to God.



## *Saints as companions and models*

We're all human. We all have flaws. In the words of St. Paul, "What I do, I do not understand... For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want" (Romans 7:15a, 19). We have faith in God; we love Jesus; we have our values; we have our principles that we try to live by. But we live in a world that constantly pulls us in other directions. It's not easy to make of our lives ones of loving service for others when we live in a world that bombards us with other values like individualism, instant gratification, consumerism, materialism, and so forth.

Saints provide for us a reminder that we are not alone in this struggle. They are our companions in this journey, as they have walked it many years before us. Sometimes, it's enough just to know that we are not alone in this struggle. Saints remind us that, for centuries, others have been giving everything of themselves to plant these seeds of the kingdom of God. And, even though it is so counter-cultural, we're not all that crazy for wanting to lay down our lives in humble service of God and neighbor. Well, maybe we are crazy, but at least we're not the only crazy ones. These saints have laid the foundation that we continue to build upon in this world.

Saints offer us many different examples of how to use the gifts and passions given to us by God for the sake of others. Each saint lived, loved, and used their gifts and passions differently from one another. They show us that there are many paths to serving God in the world and they challenge and inspire us to authentically live out the charisms we possess.



## *Saint Francis of Assisi* *(1181-1226)*

**Feast Day: October 4th**

**Patron of: Animals, Ecology, Merchants**

Francis was the son of a rich cloth merchant in Assisi, Italy. He was well educated and entered the family business. As a young man, he led a wild group that partied and brawled in the streets. For a while, he sought glory in war, but on his way to the Fourth Crusade, he had a dream from God and gave up being a soldier. He heard Christ tell him from the crucifix, "Francis, repair my Church."

Taking Jesus' call to "Leave everything and follow me", Francis renounced his riches and began to travel with no possessions. Appalled, Francis' father shunned him. Francis lived in the open, worked or relied on charity for food, and preached the Gospel. He considered all people, regardless of social status, to be his brothers and sisters. He also loved animals as siblings in God's creation and felt a deep connection to nature. Famous stories tell of him preaching to birds and pacifying a wolf (as portrayed in the image to the left).

Thanks to his joyful and loving way of life, Francis soon began to attract followers. While he resisted forming an official order, he went to see the pope in 1209. At first the pope threw him out, considering him a beggar, but finally Francis received permission to form an order of friars. He sent them out to preach two by two and insisted that they practice humility and radical poverty just as he did. The Franciscan order still exists today.

In following Christ with reckless abandon, Francis offers us a model of finding joy in simplicity and in treasuring all of creation as a valuable gift from God.

*Some material borrowed from [catholic.org/saints](http://catholic.org/saints)*



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