

ALL SAINTS DAY, YEAR A, NOVEMBER 1, 2020

Today being All Saints Day is like a family reunion day for the church. It's the day that we roll out the family album and remember all the wonderful people who make up our family and where they came from.

Since it's All Saints Day I thought it would be great to briefly speak about the four women saints who adorn my stole. The stole was given to me by the Church of the Saviour in Denville on the 10th anniversary of my being their rector. There is a fifth saint, Mary, the mother of Jesus at the top of the stole but Mary deserves a sermon devoted just to her and the mythology that has developed around her which I'll preach someday.

Anyone want to guess who the women are? To begin with we have Joan of Arc who was a force to be reckoned with as she led men twice her size into battle. She was an illiterate young maiden who believed strongly that the voices she heard in her head were from God. Those voices drove her to dress like a man in armor and present herself to the king in order to lead them out of near defeat to victory. She had no military background or the ability to ride a horse or any experience in fighting. Many learned men of her day tested her beyond belief before they would let her go into battle because they were skeptical and questioned the nature of the voices that compelled her to go to battle. However, her ardent faith, simplicity, and honesty made a favorable impression on all who questioned her and she led France into numerous victories. But when she was captured and then sold to the English the very king she helped keep in power did not lift a finger to help her. The English feared their prisoner with a superstitious terror, partly because they were ashamed of the dread which she inspired and were determined at all costs to take her life. They could not put her to death for having beaten them on the battlefield, but they could get her sentenced as a witch, a heretic and dressing as a man. She was eventually burned at the stake for her unflinching belief at the age of 19. Twenty five years later the Pope re-examined her trial and determined she was a martyr instead. In 1920 Pope Benedict XV canonized her.

Mary Magdalene has been the object of devotion, curiosity, and misunderstanding for almost 2000 years. Most people today identify her as a reformed prostitute who became one of Jesus' followers. But nothing in the biblical record shows her to have been a prostitute. Rather, it was a pope in 591AD that decided from his reading of scripture that she was a prostitute. Scholars today think that she was confused with other women mentioned in biblical sources and, in fact, in 1969 the Vatican rejected this notion of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. Scripture tells us that Jesus healed Mary from demons which is a common term used to describe many illnesses. What is clear is that Mary Magdalene was a woman with independent means who was one of Jesus' main followers and supporters and perhaps his closest disciple.

Mary is mentioned in all four gospels, where she appears as the first-named of Jesus' female followers and as the first one to encounter Jesus after his resurrection. Mary is not only known as the first to see the resurrected Jesus but the one who first told the news to the male disciples. Because of her announcement of the resurrection to the other disciples, she was known in the ancient world as "the apostle to the apostles." This exalted image of Mary did not survive, however. There was also, long before Dan Brown and his book "The DaVinci Code, a belief among some Christian groups that Mary was married to Jesus. So the church decided to discredit this notion by promoting the idea of

Mary as a fallen woman and what has developed is a composite characterization of a reformed prostitute who came to be identified in Western art by long hair with an alabaster jar of costly ointment who never seems to be forgiven. However, it's interesting to note that in the Eastern Orthodox church Mary was seen as a virtuous woman all her life. She is often depicted in Eastern Orthodox icons bearing a vessel of ointment, not because of the anointing by a "sinful woman", but because she was among those women who brought ointments to the tomb of Jesus. So her role as the apostle to the apostles was soon forgotten by the church but we need to recapture that image as a source of inspiration for our own Christian journey. In rediscovering her we find a woman that is complex and multidimensional, with a faith that is both fierce and sustaining.

Hildegard of Bingen was the 10th child of a noble family. It was customary if there was a tenth child that the child would be dedicated at birth to the church. Hildegard started to have visions at the age of three, but soon realized she was unique in this ability and hid this gift for many years. At age 8, the family sent this strange girl to an anchoress named Jutta to receive a religious education. An anchor or anchoress led an ascetic life, shut off from the world inside a small room, usually built adjacent to a church so that they could follow the services, with only a small window acting as their link to the rest of humanity. Most of the time would be spent in prayer, contemplation, or solitary hand working activities, like stitching and embroidering. Hildegard was taught by Jutta but she always felt her education was rudimentary. However, later years proved her to be incredibly accomplished. When Hildegard was 38 years of age, she was elected the head of a budding convent.

At a time when few women wrote, Hildegard, known as "Sybil of the Rhine", produced major works of theology and visionary writings. When few women were accorded respect, she was consulted by and advised bishops, popes, and kings. She used the curative powers of natural objects for healing, and wrote treatises about natural history and medicinal uses of plants, animals, trees and stones. She composed music and founded a vibrant convent, where her musical plays were performed. In fact my daughter, who teaches music, remembers during her undergraduate work that in her music history class they were studying Hildegard's music. She had an irresistible spirit and vibrant intellect which helped her in overcoming social, physical, cultural, and gender barriers to achieve timeless transcendence.

Margaret of Scotland was an English princess. She and her mother sailed to Scotland to escape from the Norman king who had conquered their land in 1068. King Malcolm of Scotland welcomed them and fell in love with the beautiful princess. Margaret, however, wanted to enter the convent but her spiritual advisor suggested that she could do more if she married Malcom.

As Queen, Margaret changed her husband and the country for the better. He recognized that Malcom was a good man, but he and his court were very rough. To his credit, he saw how wise his beloved wife was and he listened to her advice. She softened his temper and led him to practice great virtue. She is credited with converting him to Christianity and they became wonderful examples to everyone by the way they prayed together and fed crowds of poor people with their own hands.

Margaret was a blessing for all the people of Scotland. Before she came, there was great ignorance and Margaret worked hard to obtain good teachers and to have new churches built. She loved to make these churches beautiful for God's glory, and she

embroidered the priest's vestments herself. She has been credited in helping bridge and blend Celtic Christianity with the mainline church. She was canonized a saint in 1250 by Pope Innocent IV.

What all these women and all saints have in common is that they are really ordinary men and women whose love of God has led them to do extraordinary things, which means none of us can shrug our shoulders and say sainthood is beyond our reach. It would also be a mistake to assume that you must be dead to be a saint. The truth is there are living saints all over the place. A few years back there was a story about a woman named Osceola McCarty of Mississippi. She became a laundress at the age of twelve to support her family. She worked as a laundress for 75 years and then gave her life savings of \$150,000. to the University of Southern Mississippi for black scholarships. When asked why she did not spend the money on herself she simply replied, "I am spending it on myself."

On All Saints Day we make a bold claim that all these people are our relatives. We have the same blood running in our veins – Christ's blood – and the same light we see shining in them shines in us too. Being a saint means first and foremost belonging to God. Just remember that you do not have to be famous, or perfect, or dead. You just have to be you, - the one of a kind, never to be repeated human being whom God created you to be – to love as you are loved, to throw your arms around the world and to shine like the sun.

You do not have to do it alone either. We have all this company – all these saints sitting right here whom you can see for yourself plus those you cannot encouraging us to be all that we can be and reminding us that we are knit together in the communion of saint dropped on the world for the love of Christ. Amen