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The Importance of the Saints And Devotion to Them

St. Bernard of Clairvaux
Abbot and Doctor of the Church



This excerpt from a sermon by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (Sermo 2: Opera omnia, Edit. Cisterc. 5 [1968], 364-368) is used in the Roman Office of Readings for the Feast (Solemnity) of All Saints on November 1. By the early 5th century, a feast in honor of all saints was celebrated in the Christian East on the first Sunday after Pentecost, as it is to this day. This festival has been celebrated in the West on November 1 since the mid 8th century. The Feast is a celebration of the "fullness" of Christ's glory made manifest in the members of his body who in their lifetime yielded to His Spirit and thus produced neither thirty nor sixty but a hundredfold. J.J. Olier, the founder of the Society of Saint Sulpice, said "The feast of All Saints seems to me to be in some sort a greater than that of Easter or the Ascension. Our Lord is perfected in this mystery, because, as our head, He is only perfectly fulfilled when He is united to all His members, the saints. The feast is glorious because it manifests exteriorly the hidden life of Jesus Christ. The greatness and perfection of the saints is entirely the work of His spirit dwelling in them."

Why should our praise and glorification, or even the celebration of this feast day mean anything to the saints? What do they care about earthly honors when their heavenly Father honors them by fulfilling the faithful promise of the Son? What does our commendation mean to them? The saints have no need of honor from us; neither does our devotion add the slightest thing to what is theirs. Clearly, if we venerate their memory, it serves us, not them. But I tell you, when I think of them, I feel myself inflamed by a tremendous yearning.

Calling the saints to mind inspires, or rather arouses in us, above all else, a longing to enjoy their company, so desirable in itself. We long to share in the citizenship of heaven, to dwell with the spirits of the blessed, to join the assembly of patriarchs, the ranks of the prophets, the council of apostles, the great host of martyrs, the noble company of confessors and the choir of virgins. In short, we long to be united in happiness with all the saints. But our dispositions change. The Church of all the first followers of Christ awaits us, but we do nothing about

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it. The saints want us to be with them, and we are indifferent. The souls of the just await us, and we ignore them.

Come, brothers, let us at length spur ourselves on. We must rise again with Christ, we must seek the world which is above and set our mind on the things of heaven. Let us long for those who are longing for us, hasten to those who are waiting for us, and ask those who look for our coming to intercede for us. We should not only want to be with the saints, we should also hope to possess their happiness. While we desire to be in their company, we must also earnestly seek to share in their glory. Do not imagine that there is anything harmful in such an ambition as this; there is no danger in setting our hearts on such glory.

When we commemorate the saints we are inflamed with another yearning: that Christ our life may also appear to us as he appeared to them and that we may one day share in his glory. Until then we see him, not as he is, but as he became for our sake. He is our head, crowned, not with glory, but with the thorns of our sins. As members of that head, crowned with thorns, we should be ashamed to live in luxury; his purple robes are a mockery rather than an honor. When Christ comes again, his death shall no longer be proclaimed, and we shall know that we also have died, and that our life is hidden with him. The glorious head of the Church will appear and his glorified members will shine in splendor with him, when he forms this lowly body anew into such glory as belongs to himself, its head.

Therefore, we should aim at attaining this glory with a wholehearted and prudent desire. That we may rightly hope and strive for such blessedness, we must above all seek the prayers of the saints. Thus, what is beyond our own powers to obtain will be granted through their intercession.

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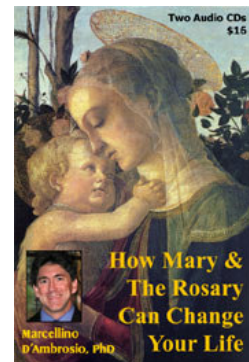
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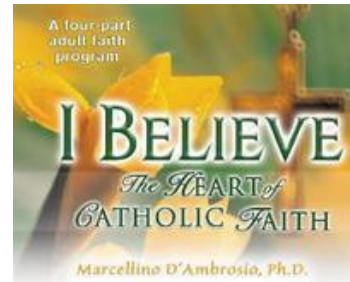
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