

What's in your Pantheon?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, November 6, 2011, All Saints' Sunday.
Based on Matthew 5:1-12.*

In the year 125 a.d., the emperor Hadrian rebuilt a destroyed temple in the center of Rome. It was an awesome achievement, the largest concrete structure in the world until the 20th century. It's essentially a giant dome, and in its surrounding walls were statues of all the gods—names like Jupiter, Juno, Mars, Venus, Minerva, Neptune, Ceres, Vulcan, Diana, Bacchus, Mercury, Vesta, Isis, Pan, Mithra—hence the name Pantheon.

In the center of its circular floor animals were sacrificed and burned, and the smoke ascended up and out through an open hole in the dome, the oculus.

When Christianity replaced the pagan gods in the 4th century, the Pantheon was abandoned, but 300 years later it was consecrated as a Christian church, and the old gods were replaced by the Virgin Mary, and the saints and martyrs. Rather like the clever repurposing of the pagan Saturnalia celebrations on December 25.

We all have our temples, and we all have our gods and saints. Each of you has your Pantheon. Not a physical structure. Your temple may be in your head. It may be the place you work. It may be your family. Very possibly, like the Pantheon, it has been repurposed. What's in your Pantheon? Who are your gods and saints?

Every week here we tell the Christian story, and we wager that we have a chance to convince you and ourselves that it's worth knowing and paying attention to the "saintly" examples that move and inspire you.

This week, today, it might be appropriate to ask, Is it possible that for these children we baptize today, that we—parents, godparents, teachers, this whole congregation—might form them and influence them as they pick their "saints?" Can we lead them away from Jupiter, Bacchus, and Pan toward the passionate and brainy Paul, the caring Francis, and the restless, honest and faithful Teresa? Might those worthies open them to the wisdom, wit and integrity of Jesus? Is it possible that against all the temptations, they become aware of the very ground of their being, the creative force and reality of all that is, seen and unseen, the one we call God, the one beyond all Pantheons?

Tough questions, I know, and maybe ones fewer and fewer even bother to ask, but we're here to celebrate All the Saints, so a few definitions:

The earliest Christians often referred to one another as saints: "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints," is the way Paul begins his Letter to the Romans. Over time, the term began to be applied to those martyred for the faith, and those whose lives set examples worthy of imitating. Our liturgy today will quote the Letter to the Hebrews, saying we are "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." Tradition speaks of saints as "channels" or "vessels" of God's grace.

But there's a danger if we idealize saints. It's bad enough that we consign them to stained glass images, think of them as miracle workers, or align them with our magical thinking, as patrons of lost things or stonemasons or other specialties.

Think courage and integrity when you think of saints. Think inner restlessness that just can't believe that reality is only the things we can see and manipulate. I like to think that the road to faith begins with curiosity, emotional openness and intellectual humility. That's why I think the translation of the first beatitude in Jesus' "sermon on the mount" is opened up when the beautiful "blessed are the poor in spirit" is rendered as the challenging "how blest are those who know their need of God."

That's the spark that fires those we call saints, and as the song says, "I want to be one too."

The great social activist Dorothy Day declined the honor when people declared her saint-like, say that she did not wish to be called a saint because she didn't want to be "dismissed so easily." She was all too aware that saints are more admired than emulated, and she knew that a recognition of our fallibility is what keeps us grounded. How blest indeed are those who know their need of God.

The truth is, beyond the religious worthies, the saints listed in the calendar of the Book of Common Prayer, there are millions of citizens who refuse to succumb to what their more cynical neighbors call "reality," who insist with their lives that there has to be a better way, and who

day by day go about bringing it into being. What makes them tick? What enables them to see beneath the surface and work for the common good rather than simply for their own private welfare? What inspires people to act from their own sense of a larger integrity even when it means going contrary to the status quo? And how can these circles of compassion widen?

A few years ago, the Lilly Endowment sponsored a study of 145 remarkable “change agents”—entrepreneurs, homemakers, youth workers, artists, attorneys, writers, scientists, religious leaders, and physicians who are working to improve schools, health, business practices, race relations, economic conditions, and the quality of public life in general.

Some were well-known and well-paid, others little-known and underpaid. Representing a range of religions, ethnicities, and social classes, all were doing tough and complex work on behalf of the common good. What patterns characterize their lives? What keeps them going in the face of discouragement?

The study distills some traits, and as I read them they seemed to be the traits we generally honor in saints:

They . . .

were normal, healthy people: saints are mixed bag in this sense. Many we remember and treasure were single-minded, almost obsessive, in their dedication. Not likely to be great dinner table companions.

had a certainty of connection: to something bigger than themselves. Not in it for just what they needed.

were open to compassion as a serviceable way of live. In tough times, where we pray for the vigor of the capitalist system for the welfare of all, it’s hard to imagine those who base their lives on a different model.

are at home in the world. That’s truly saintly. We think of them often as otherworldly, but in fact they knew they had to mess around in others’ business, knowing that sometimes you have to change the system, not just help an individual. They share the insight that we all live in, and are touched, sometimes roughly, by the “system.”

are able to see “the system”

at ease with ambiguity. Agents of change and saints share this common trait. Otherwise they would be crushed, discouraged or quickly burned out. “How blest are those who know their need of God” means, among other things, “I know that in this life I might not be given the one right answer, or all the answers, but I can’t let that stop my work for others.”

Put all these things together, and we must ask: Is there a way we can help form our children and all who come to explore and be part of communities of faith like this one? Is there a way they can connect the spark of that great cloud of witnesses with the spark God has planted deep in each of us?

It’s the challenge of our faith and our belonging to provide environments that do just that. Here we hear the word from God, the words of Jesus, the stories of the adventures of the human race, of failed faith and faith that has tried to make a better world. We can all be “godparents,” providing that mentoring that was so crucial to all those who were profiled in the study.

We can expose ourselves and our children to the reality of human frailty, of poverty both economic and spiritual. We can meet people here we wouldn’t meet anywhere else, what the Lilly study calls “constructive engagements with otherness.”

Listen carefully: that isn’t just politically correct diversity. It’s also the *otherness of encountering God, who is Wholly Other*, in sacred space and worship and music. It’s the energy that flows from people who’ve been touched by God and then go right back into the city, their work, their families and the pursuit of their dreams.

They’re all saints when they do that.

It’s also otherness in this sense: when we build a Pantheon of our household Gods—money, power, protection, getting ahead, staying ahead, and yes, the power of what finance calls “the hedge”—we see ourselves and our fears reflected back at us.

When we come to the saints who have fought and healed and lived and died for something money can’t buy, where safety is the minority position, then we learn to live to the fullest of our being, surrounded by those who become fully themselves because *they know their need of God*.

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