

“God’s Faculty”

Richard Lischer

Duke University Chapel

All Saints Day November 1, 2009

Outside the little town of Chartres in France, you drive on ordinary country roads past ordinary little farm houses until you see something so extraordinary that your eyes almost disbelieve. For there, shimmering in the morning mist, is a church so supernaturally beautiful that it appears to be descending to earth. At the first sight of it, you catch your breath and say something dumb like “Now that’s what I call a church,” but what you mean of course is, “That’s the church!” That’s the church as it is portrayed in the Book of Revelation—“descending from heaven, adorned as a bride.” Triumphant, beautiful, transcendent.

Some years ago I returned to a church I once served in the rural Midwest. It too is located on an ordinary road in an ordinary cornfield; however, it does *not* appear to be descending from heaven but its worn red bricks seem to grow up out of the soil. There are no tour busses in its parking lot, and it definitely does *not* shimmer in the morning mist. It is capped off not by a majestic tower but a peeling steeple with a cross from which one arm is sadly missing.

These two churches are a parable of All Saints Day. Yet they are *not* two churches but two dimensions of one church—The church above that lives by sight, and the church below that struggles by faith. In the church above—there is no suffering, mourning or grief. No disease, no addiction, violence, no heart monitors or infusion bags. In the church below—well, you know.

These two sibling congregations almost never meet except on All Saints Day, the day the church sets aside to remember the suffering and to imagine the glory.

There are two ways of getting to know the saints, just as there are two ways, let us say, of learning about Impressionistic painting. You can take a course on Impressionism and listen to lectures for a semester, OR you can walk into the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and stand agog in front of a 42-foot-wide Monet and let *it* explain what Impressionism is all about. Some of us are grateful for the saints because we've read the book of Revelation or have studied church history. Others of us are grateful for the saints because we've lived in the presence of one person in whom the goodness of God was condensed and focused, and in whom the glory was visible, and that is enough. Your entire education in sainthood may have to come to you through the prism of one "for instance."

It might have been the grandmother who prayed you through a difficult childhood (grandmothers are good at that); or the spouse who believed in you when you didn't believe in yourself; or perhaps the college chaplain who brought you to Christ just when you were sure you had outgrown God; or perhaps it was the parents who sacrificed everything in order to give you opportunities they never had. The funny thing is—these people don't *know* they are saints. They never applied for the job and would be embarrassed by the title. Some of them are like the Whiskey Priest in Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*. He's a priest who keeps a mistress, drinks too much, and is afraid, but he continues to do his duty and to bring Eucharist to poor villagers despite government persecution. Just before his execution the Whisky Priest worries that he is going to God empty-handed; the poor man doesn't even know he's a saint.

(And of course the people who know they are saints, aren't)!

Sainthood never really caught on among most Protestants. We said the veneration of the saints might detract from salvation through Christ alone, but the real reason today has more to do with radical arrogance than radical faith. The fact is, we don't want *anybody* to form or shape us in anything. That work is so important that we choose to do it for ourselves. Mentors are for people who *need* mentoring—not us. Big Brother and Big Sister programs are for kids at risk—not our kids. In the university we pay homage to the wisdom of others, of course, but our real mission is to teach you undergraduates to think for yourself. We once celebrated the self-made men, the captains of industry who build American empires. Today we're more likely to admire those who have reinvented themselves. I remember a presidential debate in which one candidate asserted that his opponent had reinvented himself. It was not received as a compliment. Today, it's considered a mark of genius. Yesterday, you were an insurance executive; today you're a holistic healer. Yesterday, you were a disgraced politician; today you're Dancing with the Stars. You will be successful in proportion to the chutzpah with which you thumb your nose at your former identity.

And when you stop and think about it, that's what many of the saints did too—they made 180-degree detours from one life into another. But instead of re-inventing *themselves* they seem to have *been* reinvented by God. In the 4th century Martin of Tours was a soldier in the Roman army. One day he saw a beggar at the gate of Amiens and he impulsively cut his his *cappa*, his cloak, in two, and covered the man with it. He proceeded to devote the rest of his life to being a *capalein*, a chaplain, to those in need. In the 20th century Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a wealthy, rising star in the Berlin firmament when he was arrested for his opposition to Hitler. Writing to friend from the Tegel concentration camp he said, in effect, 'Don't feel sorry for me; I'm no victim. I have discovered true freedom.' In the 19th century Therese of Lisieux was a French

teenager, who became convinced that God's love is found in what she called "the little way" of everyday acts of kindness and mercy toward others. When she got around to writing her autobiography at the ripe old age of 23 she had already dived into this pond named God so deeply that she neglects to tell her readers that she was dying of TB. In the 1970s a student named Paul Farmer attended Duke University, where he undoubtedly loitered in the quad, partied on East, worshipped at Cameron, and studied in Perkins. After medical school he founded an organization that brings free health care to the people of Haiti and other impoverished nations. Last year, on All Saints Day a priest in Boston—and one of Farmer's old fraternity brothers—said, 'I know it embarrasses him when I say it, but Paul's a saint.' "He models for us how to be a Christian, how to be human in these inhumane times."

The saints are our teachers. They are God's faculty. And here is what they teach: they teach the hardest subjects, the kind that, when you're honest with yourself you say 'I could use a tutor,' —subjects that even the world has not yet mastered and perhaps never will. They teach us how to forgive. They teach us how to say no to power. They teach us how to forget our own problems and to serve others. But most of all, the saints teach us how to die.

As you know, the church doesn't observe the birthdays of the saints and martyrs but their death-days. The story of any saint always begins with a rollicking good death. It's as if the church is asking, 'What *is* it about *this life* and this set of commitments that make this *death* so precious in God's sight?' When a man named Polycarp of Smyrna was burned at the stake for his faith in the Second Century the elders of his church were there taking notes. It's from them that we learn he could have skipped his own funeral by saying two little words, "*Kurios Caesar*, Lord Caesar." The church has lived off his refusal for almost two millennia. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was finally summoned from his cell to be hanged there was someone *there* to record

his final witness—to tell us how he refused to go to God in his prison clothes and threw them off, how he knelt on the concrete floor, how he said to the prison doctor, “For me this is the end but also the beginning of life.” It was his last lecture.

I would include in our list of teachers those who are not otherwise commemorated. They are the ones who quietly incorporate the routines and the indignities of dying into their walk with Jesus and thereby turn their walk into a witness. And what would we do without them? Just imagine a world with only victims and no witnesses.

Some years ago there was a movie with a little boy in it whose signature line was, “I see dead people.” And that freaked everybody out. For death is the ultimate taboo; it is the unmentionable subject in polite conversation. Better not to talk about it, because you might say the wrong thing. Those who grieve are often stunned by the silence that surrounds their loss. For our culture teaches: Death is a private matter between you and your hospice nurse. Grief is a private matter between you and your therapist. Even hope is a private matter between you and your priest. Despair is a private matter between you and your own broken heart.

There’s a website you can go to and anonymously confess your sins. There’s a little box in which you type your sins: “I lied, I cheated, I stole”—whatever. And then (I am not making this up) you click on forgive. Only imagine, you’ve opened a vein in your soul by confessing your sins—but to no absolution, no table brimming with bread and wine, and no saints to throw their arms around you and welcome you home. Faith is a private matter. Shh.

But look up! Look up and see starship church descending, and look around and see the brothers and sisters contending to be faithful, and you realize we don’t have to be so lonely. We are not alone.

In the Roman world the dead were buried outside the walls of the city in a necropolis of their own. It's the oldest form of segregation. Not 'separate but equal' but 'dead therefore separate.' But then the church did something unthinkable in a pagan society. It said, in effect, '*We see dead people*, and, behold, they are good. Christians began taking their bread and wine and holy books out into the cemeteries where the faithful were buried and began worshipping *with* them. Then they did something even more radical. In the Sixth Century they began moving their dead inside the walls and onto sacred ground where they could be nestled around the church, and some of them they moved *into* the church. They began treating the dead saints as friends, invisible companions, and teachers.

And just think of what they have to teach! For they are now eternal. They are present to the living God night and day in a realm where there is no night and there is no day. For poor time-kept, time-worn, mutable, anxious, suffering creatures like us they offer the eternal perspective. They offer little tutorials on how to live for eternity amidst the responsibilities of time. They make it easier for us to live as though Jesus Christ really is risen from the dead, which he is. These faithful people are not figures painted in plaster or carved into pulpits like the one I'm standing in. They are friends, companions, and teachers—of another realm.

And in teaching us how to die, they show us what real life is all about.

O Blessed communion, fellowship divine,

We feebly struggle they in glory shine.

[Yet] all are one in thee, for all are thine.

Alleluia!

