**Armour of God**

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Saint Patrick’s Basilica

The Saints Speak to These Times

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Our Church, in her wisdom, mercy, and love, gives us countless supports to help us know and love God and our neighbour as we strive for heaven. First, we have the magisterium to learn from – the authority that teaches, in the name of Christ, morals and other truths of Christian faith, & all that is necessary to proclaim and defend them.[[1]](#footnote-1) Of course, we have the Catechism, and we encounter the Lord in Scripture which is as crucial to our hearts and souls as breathing is to our bodies. We have each other – Christian community in our families, circles of friends, and parishes is invaluable.

But what about the generations of Christians who have gone before us? If heaven is truly “eternal life,” are we supposed to remain completely disconnected from those who enjoy it now?

Tonight, I hope to introduce you to some good friends of mine. Their advice and wisdom have proven priceless as I’ve learned to grow in my relationship with the Lord. We talk almost every day, and yet I’ve never visited their houses, and I don’t know their phone numbers. Did I mention that they lived decades – even centuries – before me? They are Saints.

Sections 954 and 955[[2]](#footnote-2) of the Catechism state

*“[At] the present time some of his disciples are pilgrims on earth. Others have died and are being purified, while still others are in glory, contemplating ‘in full light God himself, triune and one, exactly as he is.’[[3]](#footnote-3)*

*All of us, however, in varying degrees and in different ways, share in the same charity towards God and our neighbors …[all,] indeed, who are of Christ and who have his Spirit form one Church and in Christ cleave together.[[4]](#footnote-4) [The] union of the wayfarers* ***[that is, current travelers on earth – us!]*** *with the brethren who sleep in the peace of Christ is in no way interrupted.”*

Holy figures as far back as the Old Testament have been held up as examples for believers. In fact, Section 61 of the Catechism says that “the patriarchs, prophets and certain other Old Testament figures have been and always will be honored as saints in all the Church's liturgical traditions.”2

The end of Hebrews 11 also discusses the example of prophets & heroes who preceded Christ. As verses 39 and 40 say, Gideon, Samson, David, and others “were commended for their faith…” without “[receiving] what was promised, since God had provided something better” – the Incarnation and continued presence of Christ the Son.

The first two verses of Hebrews 12 continue: “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

If these people were seen as role models for the early Church, even though they lived well before Jesus did, it makes sense that the Church would want to continue the tradition. By making formal proclamations that believers of all ages, nationalities, and states in life are examples of faith and virtue – even those who lived in modern times. By their examples, we know that we are not alone.

We can be at peace knowing that others who have shared in our joys and sorrows have followed Christ; indeed, they are still alive and cheering us on, so that we may one day join them in heaven, praising and loving the Lord forever.

One thing that fascinates me is the knowledge that many saints had relationships with other saints whom we can also pray to. For example, Padre Pio (the Italian Franciscan mystic who died in the 1960s) had a devotion to St. Gemma, an Italian contemporary of St. Therese.[[5]](#footnote-5) If you read Gemma’s autobiography, you’ll find that she had a favourite devotion of her own: to St. Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Do we pray to saints directly, though? Although we might say that, this line is actually a shorthand for “praying to God with the assistance, or through the intercession, of” a person. The saints are not God – they do not know His mind, they are not wish-granting fairies, and they should not be objects of superstition.

I think of the novenas to St. Jude published in newspapers. He is the patron of hopeless causes & one of the apostles who lived in the first century. These novenas come across as the Christian equivalent of magic words like “Abracadabra! Hocus pocus!”

I went looking for a prayer like this that had been published in a newspaper recently, and found that the Hamilton Spectator has \*an entire section\* devoted to them. One such prayer reads: “May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be adored, glorified, loved and preserved throughout the world now and forever. Sacred heart of Jesus have mercy on us. St. Jude worker of miracles, pray for us. St. Jude helper of the hopeless, pray for us. Pray 9 times a day and publication must be promised.”

The implication is that you can say these words – and somehow - without putting your heart into them, and while knowing that the Saints, on their own, do not have power to act or answer prayers, and ignoring that Jesus is a real person with powers and a will of His own –the thing you beg for will still automatically happen!

Nope…not even close!

But saints **do** pray with and for us, in the same way as any other living loved ones would do if you ask them.

Returning to the Catechism, Section 9562 says that “[*as they are] more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven* (who are all saints)  *fix the whole Church more firmly in holiness…they do not cease to intercede with the Father for us…so by their fraternal concern is our weakness greatly helped.”[[7]](#footnote-7)*

Some of the most well-known saints had **so much trust** in the Lord’s goodness that they told those they loved on earth what they hoped to do in heaven. On her deathbed, St. Therese told one of the sisters caring for her “I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth.”[[8]](#footnote-8), 2 A dying St. Dominic told his brothers “Do not weep, for I shall be more useful to you after my death, and I shall help you then more effectively than during my life.”[[9]](#footnote-9), 2

The saints are more than holy superstars we can ask for help, though. **They are our friends!** They sinned, struggled, rejoiced, mourned, loved, and worshiped just like we do today!By now, I bet you’re wondering just who some of my best heavenly friends are. I’d like to introduce you to three of them…but first, here’s one saint whom I cannot (yet) call a friend, but whose gifts I greatly admire. He has contributed much to our intellectual understanding of God, and he could be called one of the Church’s greatest theologians.

Tomasso d’Aquino, better known to us as **St. Thomas Aquinas**, was born in southern Italy around 1224. As a boy, he was sent to the monastery of Monte Cassino; his family hoped that he would someday be abbot there. In 1239, the emperor at the time expelled the monks for being too obedient to the pope, who opposed him. Thomas then encountered the Dominicans after being sent to the University of Naples. In 1245, he went to the University of Paris – after being held captive by his family (who did not want him to move) the year before!

After teaching in Paris and Cologne, Thomas was appointed theological adviser and lecturer to the papal curia in 1259, before coming back to Paris nine years later. The Encyclopedia Britannica says “In January 1274, Thomas [was] personally summoned by Pope Gregory [the 10th] to the second Council of Lyons, which was an attempt to repair the schism between the Latin and Greek churches. On his way he [became ill and] stopped at the Cistercian abbey of Fossanova, where he died on March 7.” He is the patron saint of academics.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Thomas Aquinas is best known for being a philosopher and intellectual, and writing the *Summa Theologica*, but my favourite story about him has little to do with that. St. Thomas was praying before a crucifix one day, in tears. The voice of Christ from the cross spoke to him: “You have written well of me, Thomas. What will you have for your reward?” Thomas’s answer, in Latin, was *Domine, non nisi Te*. “Nothing but Yourself, Lord.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Isn’t that beautiful? Knowledge and love of God should not be exclusive of each other, although I am often tempted to ignore one of them! One way to learn more about him, especially for those who – like me – are not very academically-minded, might be GK Chesterton’s biography. To learn more about his teaching, check out the Pints with Aquinas radio show by Matt Fradd. (I’m not brave enough to tackle the *Summa* yet!)

The second saint I’d like you to meet has much to teach us about love, mercy and intimate conversations with Christ. We can all see the Divine Mercy painting here in the Scavi, or upstairs in the church, but how much do you know about the woman who had the painting commissioned?

The future **St. Faustina** was born Helena Kowalska in Poland, in 1905. She came from a poor farming family, and was the 3rd of 10 siblings. Helena left home at 16 to support her family by working as a housekeeper. In 1925, she entered the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, taking the name Sr. Maria Faustina of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

She was a talented cook, enjoyed tending the community’s gardens, and also served as a porter. She began having visions and locutions of the Lord, who asked her to become the “Secretary of His Mercy.” Under obedience to her spiritual director, she began keeping a diary of her life in the convent, her mystical experiences, and what happened as she tried to spread Christ’s message of love. The book is known today as *Divine Mercy in My Soul*.

Sr. Faustina died in Krakow at age 33. She was canonized on April 30, 2000, which was also the Church’s first celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday.[[12]](#footnote-12) Faustina’s diary is full of great one-liners to pray with, prayers she wrote, and even poetry! She has shown me the value of trusting in the Lord, acknowledging your littleness before Him, and the possibility of having loving and intimate conversations with Him.

I would need a few hours to share all of my favourite parts of her diary, so for tonight, I’ve picked two. In Section 94, she prays “O my Lord, inflame my heart with love for You, that my spirit may not grow weary amidst the storms, the sufferings and the trials. You see how weak I am. Love can do all.”

As someone discerning the consecrated life myself, I am convicted and deeply moved by Jesus’ words to Faustina in Section 1770; He says “You know what love demands: one thing only, reciprocity…” How well do I return, and give to others, the love I have received from Christ?

Her prayer for mercy in Section 163, although it is too long to quote here, is also a must-read for those who want to see more of the “guidepost” and even the challenge Faustina offers us!

I recommend reading her *Divine Mercy* diary, or the book *Faustina: The Mystic and Her Message*by Ewa Czaczkowska, if you would like to get to know her better.

The third saint: someone who can teach us about charity, simplicity and being a trailblazer.

Chiara Offreducio – called **St. Clare of Assisi** in English – is probably my best saint friend. Born into a noble family in the 1100s, she encountered St. Francis’s preaching as a teenager, and through him found the answer to her desire to renounce everything for Christ. She ran away from her family in the middle of the night and claimed sanctuary in a convent so she could not be brought home!

But Clare’s mother and one of her younger sisters eventually joined the community Clare and Francis founded. Clare was the first woman to write a community rule governing a women’s religious order. She argued with church authorities for years in order to obtain the “privilege” of owning nothing and living poverty – in contrast to the rich food and homes of other convents at that time. The sisters became the contemplative counterpart to Francis’ mendicant preachers, known for their fervent prayer and the miracles God worked through it. Perhaps she is probably best known as the patron saint of TV! She had a TV-like vision of a Christmas Mass in her convent that she was too ill to attend.

I have a picture of Clare in my living room, to remind me to live simply, with generosity, prayerfully, with love of the Eucharist…and we also have a mutual love of cats! My friendship with her reached a whole new level after discovering the biography *Clare: Her Light and Her Song* by Karen Karper Fredette this past spring. (This is probably the only book I’m going to recommend that our parish bookstore does not have – unfortunately, you’ll have to go to Amazon to find it.) For anyone who would like something closer to a novel, check out *Clare and Her Sisters* by Madeline Pecora Nugent.

Saint Number Four: a spiritual father on earth, an intercessor in heaven.

The final saint I’d like to share with you is one that many of us “knew” while he was alive. Karol Wojtyla was born in Poland in 1920. Through his youth minister, Jan Tyranowski, Karol was introduced to the Carmelite spirituality of St. John of the Cross, which would influence the rest of his spiritual life.

He enjoyed writing and performing in plays, soccer, and other athletic pursuits. He lost both his parents and his brother by the time he turned 21, and entered a seminary – underground thanks to the Nazi invasion of Poland – in 1944, when he was 24. He was ordained only two years later.

He was also a dedicated academic. By the 1950s, he had obtained two doctorates and was appointed professor at the Catholic University of [Lublin](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lublin-Poland). He was made a bishop in 1958, archbishop in 1963, and cardinal in 1967.[[13]](#footnote-13) Yet his new role did not fit who he was. Asked whether it was fitting for a cardinal to ski, Cardinal Wojtyla replied “It is unbecoming for a cardinal to ski badly.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

In 1978, after the passing of Popes Paul the 6th and John Paul the First, Karol Wojtyla was elected pope and took the name we all know him by – **John Paul the Second**. Throughout his pontificate, Pope John Paul created both closeness and distance between the Church’s various factions: on a trip to the US in 1979, he denounced capitalism’s neglect and exploitation of the poor, while steadfastly opposing communism as he had always done. John Paul maintained that religion should never be used to justify violence, and was one of the first people to use the term “culture of death” when condemning euthanasia, abortion, and other violations of human dignity.

In 1986 he became the first pope to go into a synagogue, and in May 2001, he became the first one to pray in a mosque.13 His academic gifts were not neglected while he was in office, either. In 1986, a series of weekly audiences on love, marriage, celibacy, the fall and redemption of humanity, were published; they were originally given from 1979-1984. Put together, these remarks make up what we now know as the Theology of the Body.[[15]](#footnote-15) Especially in his role as Holy Father, Pope John Paul has certainly said, done, and written a great deal to guide and shepherd the Catholic faithful, and as a Saint his work continues.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Pope John Paul faced a number of serious health issues. But he continued to travel, telling anxious assistants “If I collapse, I collapse.” Some say he wanted to be a public witness to the value of a person who is ill and at the end of their life, and I think he did that beautifully.

Pope John Paul passed away on April 2nd, 2005 – the vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday, a feast especially dear to him. He served as pope for over 25 years – the third longest pontificate ever. Two months after his death, Pope Benedict the Sixteenth waived the usual five-year waiting period before opening his cause for canonization. He was beatified in 2011 and canonized in 2014.13

How does the process of canonization work? It is a serious and thorough process, so please allow me to get into some nitty gritty details. For the first 500 years of the Church, recognition of a saint was “based on public acclaim or the [principle] ‘vox populi, vox Dei’ ([the] voice of the people [is the] voice of God).” From the 6th to 12th centuries, the bishop would have to study the local community’s request and a biography of the person. If he approved, he would issue a decree and “officially” canonize the person.

Beginning in the 10th century, papal approval was added. The process remained relatively unchanged until the Code of Canon Law was published in 1917. This is where the modern canonization process comes from.

A person’s cause for canonization cannot be opened until five years after their death. However, as in the case of St. John Paul, the Pope can make an exception.

The bishop of the diocese where the person died must begin the investigation, after being asked by the diocese, the person’s religious order, or an association of the faithful. “The bishop then [consults] with the [country’s bishops’ conference, the faithful of his diocese…and the Holy See.

[Once] he has received the [approval] of the Holy See, [a diocesan tribunal is put together to] investigate the [person’s] martyrdom or...life of heroic virtues… Witnesses will be called and documents written by and about the candidate must be gathered and examined.” The documentation is sent to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. When the cause is opened, they’re called a Servant of God.

“Once the diocesan…investigation is finished, the person appointed to oversee the new cause for canonization – called a postulator – prepares [a] summary of the [evidence of] virtue or [martyrdom.]” The summary is examined by a panel of nine theologians. If the majority are in favour, the cause is passed on to the cardinals and bishops of the Congregation.

If **they** support the cause, they present their results to the Pope, who “authorizes the Congregation to draft a decree declaring [the person] Venerable if they have lived a virtuous life” –or they can skip straight to Blessed if they have been martyred.  
  
In order for a Venerable to be beatified, the occurrence of a miracle attributed to their intercession must be verified with another thorough investigation, unless the person is a martyr. Once this is done, the person can be beatified and they are now called Blessed. While you can ask for a Blessed’s intercession, they can only be venerated publicly “in the diocese…region, or religious community in which they lived.”

In order to be canonized, both martyrs and those who live virtuous lives must have a second miracle attributed to their intercession. When the person is canonized, they can be called “Saint” and venerated by the whole Church.[[16]](#footnote-16) It should be noted, though, that canonization does not “make” someone a saint – it is only an official proclamation on behalf of the Church, saying that the person is definitely in heaven and able to pray for us.

**Everyone** in heaven is a saint, whether or not they will ever have a canonization process opened on their behalf. We celebrate All Saints’ Day each year to honour them all.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Now that you know who my friends are, let’s talk about how you might find someone to be your guide and companion. The Church has thousands upon thousands of saints – guaranteed, one of them will stand out to you in some way.

Each saint has a place, state in life, occupation, or circumstance of which they are a patron – think of St. Jude’s association with “desperate causes.” I became friends with St. Gianna after learning she was one of the patrons of the pro-life movement.

Someone’s life story might resonate with you – I got to know St. Gemma after researching holy young women whose conversions made them seem...well, odd, to their loved ones. Sometimes the saints find you – I converted days before John Paul died, discovered his teachings on human dignity in university, and found out this year that his birthday is three days before mine!

Friends and family might also introduce you to their favourite heavenly cheerleaders, like my grandpa passed his devotion to St. Faustina on to me.

No matter who you get to know – or how it happens – the lives, writings, and prayers of the saints are treasures waiting for you to discover them. They can motivate us to grow in holiness, in hopes that we too may join them in heaven.

How amazing will it be to meet the ones who have interceded for us throughout our lives? Even though it is not easy, Heaven – and the way to Heaven – should seem attractive and possible for Catholics to reach.

As author Leon Bloy said, “there is only one great tragedy in life: not to become a saint.”[[18]](#footnote-18) So why not give your spiritual life a boost by getting to know someone who has walked the path to Christ before you? Who knows – in a few decades, or centuries, we could also have those two letters in front of our names!

I hope that I have convinced you that saints do speak to our times. In fact, they are still part of our times, and available to all of us as friends, models, inspirations, and sources of guidance and wisdom.

I also hope that you have seen how serious a declaration of sainthood is. It is only God's judgement – not the Church’s recognition – that admits us to heaven.

Last of all, I hope that you and I recognize our own call to holiness. We should live in hope that we will go to heaven and become saints ourselves. Let’s pray for each other to make it!

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4. 1 Corinthians 13:5; cf. 10:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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7. Lumen Gentium 49; cf. Ephesians 4:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, The Final Conversations, tr. John Clarke (Washington: ICS, 1977), 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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