

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

I Believe in the Communion of the Saints

It was pointed out to me that this phrase in the Creed is little talked-of, and that this is a shame. So here I am, at least *writing* of it, on a Sunday when I am not talking to you in the flesh because I am on retreat with another manifestation of the communion of saints, the monks of Ampleforth and the students of Nottingham.

Building Up The Body Of Christ

We make, says Paul, a unity of service, as we build up Christ's body. We belong to one another the way parts of a body belong: organically related, mutually dependent, part of a single pattern which alone can experience what we call fullness of life. That would be true of any united movement, a family, a society. When we speak of the communion of the saints, however, there is a very special movement, which has to cover a spectrum of tremendous scope; it is a union at the utmost depth, of unparalleled multitudes of persons, bound together and unified by the presence of the Holy Trinity. Our communion, after all, is with God himself, and we speak of Christ as the head of the Body to whom we belong; the breath of the whole living organism is the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Creator of life; there is already something limitless about us, and no-one can subject us to the judgement of merely earthly perspectives.

All Saints

I do not think on All Saints' Day of the grand enshrined figures whose presence puts history into awe; those thunderous prelates, or towering mystics, or blazing ascetics that deserve nothing less than stained glass for their images. I think of the anonymous, the untitled poor who slog through the dust of the centuries, or trudge through the permafrost of long winters of endurance. The saints who belong in our minds, on this Sunday of the Beatitudes, have the simplicity and humility of all forgotten people - the vast majority of our human family are forgotten at last. If there is a great figure who stands at the head of this shadowy procession, it has to be Francis of Assisi, who combined the most rigorous humility with an absolutely huge appeal, which reaches to all who come to know him. His features come to us from the famous painting near his grave, and they force us to believe in a sanctity undimmed by artifice, a sanctity which is, like wisdom, friendly to all that is human. He, more than most, makes me believe

I might sit down one day with saints, to share with them Christ's gifts to his own.

The People I Have Known

Follow through the theme of simplicity, and see the working of grace in that same lowly mode: think of the grace of God working through the mystery of every family, through the holy task of bringing new faces to birth, new guests to the table of earthly life: the decades of forgiveness, patience, and generosity which each of our lives demands from others, and which we may be graced to offer in return. Sanctity does not blow a trumpet before it, but we would not deserve to live if we did not honour it in our own experience. This is what the communion of saints means to me; it is the love of people who have helped me to live, out of the kindness of their hearts, and have put up with my frequently burdensome and difficult presence with astonishing grace and goodness. The fact that this has been expressed in sacrificed pay-packets, industrious darning-needles, endless clothes-pegs, spoonfuls of cough-medicine, plates and plates of food, hours and hours of patient listening, and the simple kindness of a smile or embrace, only makes the story more moving. All Saints' is certainly the feast of ourselves, and the power of our communion with Christ, which makes our lives resound so far beyond their earthly scope. *Fr Philip*