

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

**SAINTS ALIVE**  
*Sermon for All Saints – Rev 7:9-17*  
LPC, 11/2/14

Today we “sing a song of the saints of God.” We are celebrating All Saints Day. By the most common definition, saints are the heroes of the church. Today we recognize them with gratitude.

Because it always makes news when the Roman Catholics canonize a new saint, most Episcopalians are more familiar with the Catholic understanding of sainthood than with the Episcopal understanding of sainthood. The two understandings are significantly different.

Both Episcopalians and Catholics recognize that saints are persons of exceptional piety and goodness. To be a Catholic saint however, you have to be a Catholic, and you have to have performed two accredited miracles after you are dead. To be a saint in the Episcopal calendar, you don't have to be Episcopalian if during your life you have served in some recognizably Christ-like way.

Beginning in 1964, the Episcopal Church began to take a quite open attitude to the admission of new saints to the calendar. A procedure was established by which people recognized to be saints at the local level could be proposed for inclusion in the Episcopal Calendar of Saints. This procedure involves the development of lections and liturgies, general acceptance by the wider church community, submission to the Standing Committee on Liturgy and Music, and a favorable vote at two succeeding General Conventions, which take place every three years.

This process is discriminating, but not exclusive. It has the result of democratizing sainthood to some extent. This marks a shift in the understanding of sainthood. A saint is less one who has special status in heaven than one who has had a recognizable role in the Kingdom of God as it exists both in heaven and on earth.

This reinforces the idea that heaven is not just some place we go when we die, but a kingdom we participate in now. It reinforces the connection between the church in heaven and the church on earth. As the Prayer Book Catechism says: “The communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead; those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer and praise.”

If you don't already think of communion as an activity that binds you not only to this congregation here present, but to the family of God throughout all ages, living and dead, I invite you to start thinking that way. At a previous church I served a crusty, cranky old lady would get tears in her eyes describing how when she went to communion she imagined everyone she had ever loved assembled around the communion rail.

On the front of your bulletin some of the most commonly recognized saints are pictured. I assembled this collage in an attempt to somehow approximate the vision of

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heaven described by St. John the Divine in today's excerpt from Revelation: "A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages."

This aspect of saints from every nation has been intentionally espoused by later General Conventions, so that the Calendar of Saints now includes, in addition to the more well-known saints on your bulletin, people like Enmeghbowh, the first ordained Native American, and Florence Li Tim-Oi, from Hong Kong, the very first woman ordained in the Episcopal Church.

As I mentioned earlier, some of our most recent additions to the Episcopal Calendar of Saints are not even Episcopalian. One of the most moving additions is that of the so-called "Dorchester Chaplains." Allow me to read an excerpt from their entry in *Holy Women, Holy Men*, the publication that memorializes saints.

On January 23, 1943, the *Dorchester*, a converted cruise ship, set sail with a troop convoy from New York City for Greenland with 902 persons on board. Among them were four U.S. Army chaplains, Lt. George L. Fox (Methodist), Lt. Alexander D. Goode (Jewish), Lt. Clark V. Poling (Dutch Reformed), and Lt. John P. Washington (Catholic).

On February 3, one day from their destination, a German U-Boat fired torpedoes, striking the boiler room of the *Dorchester*. Unfortunately, only two of the fourteen lifeboats were successfully lowered into the water, making it necessary for most men to dive into the nineteen degree water.

The four chaplains moved among the men, assisting, calming, and passing out life jackets from the ship's store to those forced to jump into the freezing ocean. Having given up their own life vests to save the lives of the soldiers, the chaplains remained on the aft deck, arms linked in prayer until the ship sank, claiming their lives. Two hundred thirty men were rescued from the icy waters by other ships in the convoy. Many survived because of the selflessness and heroism of the four chaplains.

Chaplains Fox, Goode, Poling, and Washington responded to a high calling from God to represent his love among men of war. On the day they died, they personified the words of Jesus found in John 15:13 "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

Stories like this are not about piety. They are not about miracles. They are about ordinary people doing extraordinary things for the love of God. They are about building the kingdom of heaven on earth. This is something we can do too.

As the song says, "The saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too."