ALL SAINTS' 2026

I have never seen so many Saints' in one city! In my recent, all too brief, trip to Rome, I was staying in an apartment overlooking the 'Basilica di San Giovanni in Laterano', Rome's official cathedral and the pope's seat as Bishop of Rome. Its immense white façade was created by Alessandro Galilei and atop it are 15, 7m-high statues representing Christ with St John the Baptist, John the Evangelist and the Twelve Apostles. Inside, at the head of the nave, a Gothic baldachin towers over the papal altar. Dating to the 14th century, this is said to contain relics of the heads of Sts Peter and Paul. Across Rome, of course, you bump into a Giotto fresco here or a Michelangelo statue there; I even saw three huge Caravaggios' in one Church telling the story of St Matthew's calling, his inspired writing and his dramatic martyrdom. And the highlight for me, early evening, was St Peter's Square – the enormity and beauty of it. My guide book said (because I couldn't count them all), there are a grand total of 284 columns topped by 140 statues of saints; Bernini, in the 17th century, made his colonnade, perspective perfection.

So do these stones and statues draw us in spiritually as well? These 'holy ones' seem so dizzily high and too hard to reach, that we feel too small or significant by comparison. If we look to the Apostles' Creed, we find our answer. We read, hear, and say for ourselves, that we believe in "the communion of saints." We are intimately connected to their lives as they are with ours; our gospel connects with the living and the dead and tells us some good news here: true goodness is possible,

and each of us is summoned to it by God. The holiness of the saints is not something to fear, neither is their moral goodness. Their legacy is also about characterful humanity. Josef Pieper wrote that the saints have youthful souls, even in old age. They are full of vitality and a splendid, arresting individuality. Despite all the real differences between St Peter and St Paul, the impetuous soul and the convert, they demonstrated no-nonsense commitment to Christ despite their failings and 'smallness', which is ours too. I like to think of the communion of saints as a continuing tapestry (much longer than the Bayeux one) where all our lives in Christ are woven and bound up together; where the beatitudes are, if you will, the common thread of a truly Christian life and a Christian death. Today, like All Souls' in a more personal way, we celebrate that "nothing can separate us from the love of Christ…

For I am persuaded, says St Paul: "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Surely the lives of the saints are evidence, that across every state or form of life, a truly excellent life is possible for everyone: queens and commoners, illiterate people and scholars, contemplatives and activists. Again that communicates the Good News to our disbelieving age. Anyone can show integrity, kindness, courage, restraint, love.

The same idea, of the possibility of goodness wherever you are, is shown in stone above the west door of Westminster Abbey, with its ten martyrs of the 20th century (installed in 1998). Among them are a Polish friar and a Ugandan archbishop, a Russian grand duchess, and a Pedi girl from the Transvaal, killed by her parents for wanting to be baptised. It is a spectacularly good use of niches that were standing empty. Part of the "communion of saints" then is the capacity to bask in the holiness of God which the saints reflect – or perhaps better- radiate from within. As St Thomas Aquinas put it, "All the good that all the saints have ever done is communicated to all who are in the state of grace because all are one." It is a daunting and yet inspiring statement of faith to believe as Aquinas did, that "whoever lives in charity participates in all the good that is done in the entire world."

If I may return to my Rome guide, Liz and I visited the simple tomb of Pope Francis, laid to rest in his favourite Church of 'Santa Maria Maggiore'. As we left, there were free copies of his exhortation on the 150th anniversary of the birth of St Teresa of Lisieux, a Carmelite nun whose 24 years of life are very much still honoured in our times. She longed to be a saint, and she believed any ordinary person could. In her autobiography, 'The Story of a Soul', she famously wrote, 'In my little way, are only very ordinary things. Little souls can do everything that I do.' Pope Francis said in his tribute to her:

"In an age that urges us to focus on ourselves and our own interests, Therese shows the beauty of making our lives a gift…At a time of great complexity, she can help us rediscover

the importance of simplicity, the absolute primacy of love, trust and abandonment, and thus move beyond a legalistic or moralistic mindset that would fill the Christian life with rules and regulations, and cause the joy of the Gospel to grow cold…In an age of individualism, she makes us discover the value of a love that becomes intercession for others."

On 15th October 2023, in the Basilica of St John Lateran, Pope Francis prayed:

"Dear St Therese, the Church needs to radiate the brightness, the fragrance and joy of the Gospel. Send us your roses! Help us to be, like yourself, ever confident in God's immense love for us, so that we may imitate each day your "little way" of holiness. Amen."