

"THOSE STIRRING SAINTS"

A Sermon By

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### INTRODUCTION

In this season of spooks and spirits and shadowy shapes (some of whom came creeping, crawling and flying into our apartment house last night), to calm my Halloween nerves and to prepare myself for this All Saints Day, I spent time with a book called Saint Watching by Phyllis McGinley. Phyllis McGinley watches saints as other people watch birds. She's fascinated by saints - not because they're pious and sanctimonious, but because they are stirring. And it made me think: we should all be "saint-watchers". If people go to Italy to see great paintings by Michelangelo and further yet to see large animals, and if people go half way around the world to see Mount Everest, why shouldn't they be interested in the Mount Everests of their own species?

It's not that saint-watching makes us saints. Watching birds doesn't teach one how to fly. Nevertheless, when living in dark valleys where hope and history never seem to meet, we must lift our eyes unto the hills. As Tennyson wrote, "We needs must love the highest when we see it."

### DEVELOPMENT

Phyllis McGinley watches saints in part because she finds them as varied and as colorful as anything a birdwatcher could hope to see.

St. Francis (one of my favorites) - as we know - called the swallows his sisters and once tamed a wolf! But how many of you have heard of St. Dominic who preached to the fish along the shores when no one came to church to hear his sermons? Given the polluted state of the waters around NY, I hope you won't desert me!

Then there was Elisha, an early desert saint who caroled like a thrush and wrote 30,000 songs (so they say). There was Nicholas the pilgrim, a shepherd who calmed his sheep by singing the Kyrie Eleison. Fat and kind, St. Thomas Aquinas was called in school, "the dumb ox". Then there was ever-so-generous Bridget of Ireland and Catherine of Sienna who, by writing like an angel and by lecturing Popes, helped to give women a respectable place in society.

Saints founded the first free hospitals. Saints invented progressive education. Said, St. Philip Neri, "If you wanted to be obeyed, you must not appear to be giving orders."

Among the saints were whores and vagabonds...thieves. Some were gregarious, like Philip of Seules; others were hermits. Some loved beauty and painted it, like Fra Angelico. And some, like St. Francis of Xavier, traveled through a dozen kingdoms with "no more eye for the scenery than a migrating bird". And let's not forget the first conscientious objector, St. Martin of Tours, a former officer in the Roman legions jailed for his beliefs by Emperor Julian; nor the legendary St. Gothard, who, when he couldn't find a hook, hung his cloak on a sunbeam!

### A SORT OF GENIUS

Phyllis McGinley considers a saint a sort of genius. She writes,

"Like musicians, painters and poets, saints are human beings, but obsessed ones. They are obsessed by goodness and by God as Michelangelo was obsessed by line and form, as Shakespeare was bewitched by language, and Beethoven by sound. And like other geniuses, they used mortal means to contrive their masterpieces."

Their masterpieces, of course, are their lives. Their lives are the only miracle; all the rest is commentary. And their lives differ from our own primarily because their hearts are stronger. The hearts of the saints can withstand the corroding effects of daily living. Fatigue and despair do not nibble away at the good intentions of the saints. Troubles in the office do not consume their kindness. The author points out that "saints master their environment, as we do not". I like that; let me repeat it.

THEIR SECRET      The secret of the saints is that they considered moderation a sin. Their dreams are wild and their ambitions were filled with a kind of desperate vitality that we'd find hard to take. Perhaps this is why Robert Neville once observed that "living with a saint is perhaps more grueling than being one".

Of course today, many of them would appear to us as crazy. But let us not forget "It is the cracked ones who let the light through". What really sets them apart from us ordinary folk is the literal way they take the central imperatives of the Gospel. Does Jesus command us to feed the hungry? The saints feed the hungry. Does Jesus command us to clothe the naked? The saints clothe the naked. Does Jesus command us to sell all we have and give to the poor - to go forth and preach to all nations, to turn the other cheek, to return good for evil, to love God and our neighbor as ourselves? The saints do all these things, because saints believe these commandments mean exactly what they say.

Saints are "love-struck" people, God-intoxicated people - and that's why they're so stirring. That's why they're the Mount Everests of the species. That's why they master their environment. Saints are conquerors because it's not those who can inflict the most, but those who suffer the most, who conquer the world. One of them once wrote these lines:

"Love bears all things. Believes all things.  
Hopes all things. Endures all things."

(St. Paul, Corinthians 13)

HEBREWS / BRINGING IT HOME

Let's listen again to that passage from Hebrews that Doreen Morales read earlier in the service:

"With so many witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us, we too, then, should throw off everything that hinders us, especially the sin that clings so easily and keep running steadily in the race we have started.

And let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith, and brings it to perfection: for the sake of the joy which was still in the future, He endured the cross, disregarding the shamefulness of it, and from now on has taken His place at the right hand of God's throne. Think of the way He stood such opposition from sinners and you will not give up for want of courage."

(Hebrews 12: 1 - 4)

I think, dear fellow Christians, that most of us lead lives of quiet heroism, to paraphrase Thoreau. But today, that may not be enough. It may be that some of

us are going to have to train like those Marathon runners of last Sunday who led the race to be a little more saintly!

I don't have to tell you that there is a disturbing mood creeping over the country, that we seem to be pulling back from the frontiers of love and compassion and proclaiming a Gospel of hanging on to what we have...never mind the deprivation of others in this land or other lands. Let me remind you that "in the race for which we have been entered" (as St. Paul put it), love is the long distance runner. That has a longer wind than any other contestant in the race. And that's why St. Paul said, "Love never ends".

Also, there are growing numbers of damaged souls from the hedonistic and egocentric dream machines who are wondering if, in fact, there is another way, and many are looking for religious figures to re-design their broken lives. Religion needs heroes and saints as never before.

FINALLY REMEMBER Finally, let me remind you that "the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God....slight was their affliction and great will their blessings be." That means that once you become a Christian, the worst that can possibly happen to you has already happened. For in the words of the hymn we sang earlier:

"The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to his foes; that soul, though Hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake".

I believe that love alone makes us safe against all the assaults of life and of death itself. As the Bible says:

"God is love and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in Him".

That means our lives read from God, in God and to God again. And this is the lesson we learn from the blessed saints - those stirring souls, those Mount Everests of their species. They're intriguing strangers in our midst and they tempt us to take a similar "leap of faith" even as did they. And so, dear friends, on this All Saints Day, let us pray God that a bit of their exuberance and their stamina, their faith and their style may rub off on some of us.

PRAYER We thank You, O God, for those whose names shine like stars in the dark firmament. When we are discouraged, remind us of the race they once ran and give us the will to follow in their steps, knowing that the race is worth the running and that it eventually runs out into light and joy and fellowship with You.

Save us from making quick and shallow judgments upon those whom we know only from the outside and fix our eyes upon those who have fought the good fight, kept the faith and finished the course - to the end that we, when we are tempted to give up, may keep on.

Help us to learn from them as we know them more and more, and as we are drawn to Jesus, our Lord and Master, we ask that we may be grafted into Him, rooted in Him so that our lives may be His instrument, that He may be in us and we in Him. Amen