

# Saints Undercover

Therefore, 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. (Heb 12.1)

This weekend is the Feast of All Saints in the Armenian Church, or as the official title says, Տօ՛ւ ամեն սուրբերու, ինչ եւ նոր, ծանօթ եւ անծանօթ; The Feast of All Saints; Old and New, Known and Unknown. Does anything strike you about that title? Incredibly, it asks us to celebrate not just the saints old and known, but also the new and unknown! Who are these new and unknown saints? Do we know any of them? Could they be here today? What a shock it would be for us if there were saints in our midst. We would have to take the saints off their pedestals as famously holy people from the past-and start looking for them in our ordinary modern life. Incredibly, this is exactly what today's feast and readings tells us; that Saints aren't always famous, many more perhaps are unknown. Saints aren't just sealed off in the past, apparently they belong to our present as well. And if this is true, it has great consequences for us all. It might mean that each of us ordinary folks has a unique calling to holiness/saintliness (same word in Armenian), and that even now there are saints among us.

The saints, the martyrs are indeed very ordinary and simple in their main function. The word martyr in Greek and Armenian means witness, and a witness simply establishes the truth by giving evidence. When we celebrate the Saints today, we celebrate those who have given evidence, who have made God believable by how they have lived and how they have died. Please note that the saints aren't those who looked holy, or who spoke well about God, but rather those who made God tangible by their life and death, just as Jesus made God tangible in His life and death.

Two years ago our church, for the first time in 500 years, said that the martyrs of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 passed this test of making God tangible by their life and death. Two years ago, our church proclaimed that the saints aren't just a few famous ancients, they are many known and unknown near contemporaries of ours. These new saints are some of our fathers and mothers and grandpas and grandmas who endured the Genocide, yet kept their faith, giving crucial evidence, crucial testimony, that the way of the cross goes through hell, but emerges in Resurrection; in the blessed new life we have in the Diaspora and the Armenian Homeland.

Thank God our church has proclaimed and recognized what was always true, that the saints are many, known and unknown, and much closer to us than we thought. Indeed, amazingly, they aren't just close to us, they are among us. That's the bombshell of today's scripture reading from Hebrews. "Without us," the reading says, all the great Saints, "will not be made perfect (Heb 11:40)." This is an extraordinary claim. In the Armenian Church context, it is saying that St. Hripsime and St. Gregory the Illuminator, who suffered terribly for their faith, who performed stunning miracles, without us, those now living, they will not be made perfect. Is this just hyperbole or pandering to the crowd? No, this is the consequence of being adopted into the spiritual family of the Armenian Church of Christ.

All of our saints, all of our great witnesses become perfect, become fulfilled into the life God has called them, when we relate, respond and follow them. So that the way in which they have made God credible comes alive in us. Our life is bound up with theirs and surprisingly, their life is bound up with ours. The saints enter into their glory when we come with them. What this also means is that, in the life of the church, no-one's holiness is their property, it is shared and given into the lives of others. That is where it becomes fully itself.

So therefore, the saints aren't stuck in the past, they are brought by us into the present. We do this by telling stories of the Saints to remind ourselves what is possible within any Christian family. We need to tell the stories of those who have made God credible to us. I must keep retelling the story of Mary Kaye Waldron my friend at Boston College whose gracious life and death made God real and tangible in a way that has changed my life forever. You all need to tell stories about those who have shown you, even in small ways, that it is possible to lead lives of holiness and that here in Pinellas Park God has called you together to make God's presence tangible and known to others. Because, believe it or not, all of you here today, you may be the golden age, the founding generation on whose faith and holiness future generations depend.

So today on All Saints Day, we celebrate not only the famous few saints from the past, but also the many new saints of today and even tomorrow. Let us be mindful that the Saints we have not yet met and the Saints who have not yet been born, their holiness and welfare is bound up with ours. Let us today ask ourselves what witness we want to leave to them and what is possible for us if God in Christ is truly tangible in the lives of his holy people, now and always; amen.