

Doesn't it strike you as bizarre that our secular culture celebrates the eve of All Saints so lavishly, with parties, costumes, and candy galore, yet ignores the actual feast day so completely? Halloween has become a commercial blockbuster, but All Saints' Day? There are no sales, no parties, no decorations, no articles on how to prepare special meals. You can turn on the radio without hearing endless versions of "For All the Saints," "Ye Watchers and ye Holy Ones," and "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God." There's a whole series of movies called "Halloween," but cinema ignores today, apart from "Boondock Saints II: All Saints Day," the sequel to a 1999 cult action comedy, and it isn't even about All Saints' Day.

Isn't it a little strange that no one, but no one, is trying to commercialize a major holy day, celebrated by both Catholics and Protestants, strategically expanding the holiday shopping season? But no, not a thing to buy, not that I'm complaining. When you think of our society's endless quest to commercialize every event, corporate America's seeming ignorance of All Saints' Day starts to seem suspicious. It's almost as if there's something about this day powerful enough to halt society's strongest tendencies but subtle enough to remain at the outer edges of our perception.

Well, there is: the communion of saints. The idea and the reality of the communion of saints is much bigger than most people realize, since most people have an incomplete understanding of what a saint is. Most of the time, when we talk about saints, we mean the handful of people whom the Church recognizes on her calendar, or the longer list of people officially deemed worthy of such recognition but not having a designated day. And it's true that All Saints' Day was originally established to solve the problem of having more people worthy of the honor than there are days in the calendar — a wonderful problem to have. But there is another, older and broader, meaning of the word "saint," one that gives much greater size and power to the communion of saints. To be a saint is to choose to follow and obey Jesus Christ as our Lord.

How sad that our tendency is usually to narrow this idea, rather than to broaden it. Make no mistake: the communion of saints is radically inclusive. Yes, there are the great heroes of the faith who have gone ahead of us into the glory of heaven. But there are also with them all Christians of every age, even the most humble and the most flawed. Even famous saints have famous shortcomings: Peter denied, Paul persecuted, James and John coveted positions, and they all quarreled with each other. Augustine of Hippo famously prayed, "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet." When you learn about the lives of the saints, at first you're struck by their most famous accomplishments, but then, you're *more* amazed by how relatable they are.

This is because sainthood is not defined by human goodness, but by the goodness of God that transforms individuals, in order to transform the world. And the more flawed the individual, the greater the glory to God when they choose to serve God. And so we begin to see the breadth and the depth, the overwhelming size and power of the communion of saints. Baptism and the Eucharist unite us to this communion.

Baptism is the first step in a life of increasing sanctity leading up to union of the person's will with God's will, and in every Eucharist, the communion of saints is present in worship with us. Brother Curtis Almquist of the Society of St. John the Evangelist wrote, "It is not just we who are praying, but we are being prayed for by a great cloud of heroic witnesses, some of whom, I believe, are attracted to us, who have our name and have our number and who remember us. It's a wonderful thing to be remembered. I think we are."

How strange then that being a member of the communion of saints puts one into conflict with the world. As we contemplate the vastness of that community, we tend to forget that there are elements and forces outside its expansive boundaries.

But Jesus did not forget. Today's gospel tells us that as he was contemplating raising Lazarus, Jesus was "again greatly disturbed." He had already wept for his friend. This time, Jesus realized that raising Lazarus would set in motion a chain of events that would lead to his own death. Not because there was some sort of supernatural balance between life and death that had to be satisfied. No. Rather, God is the maker, giver, and protector of life. Death is an insult and a corruption, and cannot make demands on God.

But Jesus knew that the act of raising Lazarus would bring him attention, stoke the jealousy and fear of the authorities. And indeed, the very next passage in John's gospel tells of how some who witnessed the raising of Lazarus were moved not to faith, but to fear. These people went to the authorities, who recognized the threat to their power and their materialistic world view, and so began the conspiracy to kill Jesus.

Don't let that detail pass you by. Why would anyone respond to the joyful miracle of the raising of Lazarus the way the authorities did? In a word, values. They placed more value on inanimate, abstract institutions than on a man's life. They resisted the love and grace of God. There can be no miracles for those who love things and use people. God set things up the other way around.

So don't be troubled. God first loved us, that we might respond with love. God established a communion of saints, not a communion of stuff. And God's love is stronger than all the forces that oppose God, stronger than conspiracies, materialism, sin, and stronger even than death itself. That's why the forces of materialism can't touch All Saints' and why I have loved this feast day so much since I was a child.

Today should encourage us to saintliness, but also remind us that our hope and our accomplishments are not in us, but in what God has accomplished in us, and through us, and despite us. Today we celebrate our relationship with God and with one another. We celebrate the wisdom and grace and results of our God, who is life and love, who makes the impossible real and the common holy, who draws us ever closer and longs to count us among the saints.