**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

28TH of SEPTEMBER MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS

30TH of SEPTEMBER JEROME

1ST of OCTOBER THERESA of LISIEUX

4TH of OCTOBER FRANCIS of ASSISI

ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS is a feast initiated in the western church to honour all angels, whatever they may be, and whatever they may be they’re not the little putti that you see in some late Italian art, that Matthew Fox suggests you’d probably feel like giving a smacked bottom!

According to Gregory the Great, angels are functions of God; they take on their allotted tasks: the three we read of are:

* MICHAEL = ‘Who is like God’
* GABRIEL = Strength of God
* RAPHAEL = Healing of God

The last, Raphael, appears in the book of Tobit, to restore his sight.

Luke’s Gospel seems to be full of angels, not all of them named, but they’re either there as messengers or to minister on God’s behalf, such as the one who comforted [= strengthened] Jesus in Gethsemane.

If you really want the official version, the subject is covered in one of the chapters of ‘City of God,’ but solid gold version comes in ‘The Celestial Hierarchy’ by the 6th century Syrian monk Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite, available from Audible for those suffering from sleep deprivation.

For those of us with Protestant leanings, ‘The Physics of Angels’ is a book by Matthew Fox and one of the Sheldrakes, which gives a far more plausible notion of what angels may be than anything we might encounter in an art gallery.

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ST THERESE [Teresa] of LISIEUX [1873-97] was an absolute phenomenon, and was canonised in 1925 and created DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH by John-Paul II in 1980. How did a sickly young girl who died in a convent before the age of 25 become a Saint and Doctor of the Church so young and so quickly?

The most efficient and interesting answer to this question is given in a veery short book by Abbot Thomas Keating, writing to celebrate Teresa’s elevation. His tribute, which lasts just about an hour in audio version, takes six parables and applies each to aspects of Teresa’s spirituality, and the impact is quite stunning.

Teresa experienced a calling to become a Carmelite sister from age 13, and, not unnaturally everybody who bore any responsibility in the order advised her to wait, but, not, apparently, without being totally bowled over by her appealing personality, her single-mindedness and her utter holiness.

It was the late Barbara Cartland who was known as the ‘Iron Meringue,’ for her superficial sweetness concealing a very grounded and clever business brain, but the epithet might have suited Teresa, though in a rather different, and infinitely more spiritual fashion.

Both of Teresa’s parents had wished to take religious vows, but father became a watch-maker and mother a lace-maker. There were nine children, most of whom didn’t survive infancy, but two elder sisters became Carmelites, and Teresa had been very attached to them after the early death of their mother, so that it was natural for those around her simply to assume that becoming a Carmelite herself would merely fulfil a perceived need for emotional security. It so happened that another sister became a Poor Clare, and a cousin followed Teresa into the Carmel at Lisieux, so one might be tempted to discern God at work here, since the marriage was both very happy and fruitful.

The other quite phenomenal asset Teresa enjoyed was a very supportive father. Once convinced of Teresa’s vocation, he accompanied her to Bayeux to put her case to the Bishop, and, on being advised to wait, however kindly, they went on pilgrimage to Rome; managed, somehow, to get an interview with the Pope, who referred them back to the Provincial, who agreed that the convent at Lisieux should take her on as a novice at age 15, which was exceptional.

Once ensconced in the convent, Teresa’s troubles had barely started, because her novice-mistress wasn’t too pleased at taking responsibility for a sickly and hyper-sensitive ‘prodigy,’ and she and others made life difficult. Teresa was assigned simple duties that she evidently didn’t always fulfil to the required standards, and she continued to suffer from her tearful reactions, doing everything she could in order to please and impress.

Teresa was professed and clothed at age 17, and allowed to remain with the novices as senior, and acquired a reputation for firmness and discipline.

Her poetry is published, but Teresa’s main fame derives from her ‘Story of a Soul,’ which developed by means of her reflections on her faith journey, the simplicity and clarity of which was noticed and encouraged by her Superior, and was gathered into a book that became an enormous success and brought Teresa to public attention at a time when French political ethics and spirituality were under intense scrutiny during the infamous Alfred Dreyfus scandal.

What Abbot Thomas puts his finger on so clearly and succinctly are some of the unique aspects of Teresa’s spirituality. There is a lot of ‘inspirational’ literature about accepting various forms of suffering, but Teresa made it her life’s work to embrace it, although some passages in ‘Story of a Soul’ can seem horribly mawkish, and reading the early chapters can feel like wading through treacle, but it’s worth bearing in mind that Teresa described herself as ‘a little flower,’ and valued the simplicity of childhood; some of her writings resembles the earliest chapters of Augustine’s ‘Confessions,’ but only superficially. When she writes of her willingness to suffer any of the many and varied horrors that Christian martyrs underwent, for the sake of her love for Jesus; what’s important is to see through the fantasy to the very practical ways in which she cultivated a deep humility, not for its own sake, but because it carried her through the many reverses that she experienced both in the convent and in her life generally.

Another aspect of Teresa’s very practical spirituality arising from this humility was her determination just to carry on trying her best in difficult situations without necessarily expecting earth-shattering results.

In ‘Story of a Soul’ Teresa frankly admits that she had been rather spoilt: all the way through her struggles to be accepted into Carmel it is clear that she had a very appealing presence, and she’d have been less than human if she hadn’t set this gift to work for her: one of her hardest-fought internal battles resulted from having to learn when and how to dispense with this gift and the temptation to carry on using it.

Through little acts of kindness, which were sometimes passed over or even misunderstood, she overcame her natural wish to be recognised for these: she’s very honest about the internal battles that rage within her mind and spirit, and, particularly in ch9 of her book, emerges with some tough reflections with which most of us could, or should, be able to identify.

Another important aspect of her example is for those who, in Milton’s phrase: ‘also serve who stand and wait;’ people, in other words, who, for reasons quite beyond their control, are unable to participate in ‘real life’ as we choose to call it. Through illness, and through the nature of her vocation, Teresa went straight from her family circle into the convent, and it’s hard to believe that such a life could teach the rest of us anything very much, but to those with long-term illness or disability Teresa blazes a path:

Perhaps the ‘industrial diamond meringue’ then for her incredibly hard work?

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ST JEROME was born in 342 and died in 420, which makes him a contemporary of Augustine, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and others.

He was born into a wealthy Christian family; his father had enough money to afford him the best possible education in Rome. In the early 340’s he became a student of the grammarian Aelius Donatus, and completed with a year-long training as a rhetorician. As a student Jerome began putting together a large library which became one of the most significant of its time. Although from a Christian family, he was not baptised until 366.

After Rome Jerome and a friend travelled to Trier, where he encountered Christian hermits, and recognised a call to a more austere lifestyle so that in 372 he departed for Antioch, which involved a painful rupture with his relatives. He spent several years in the Syrian Desert, then in 376 he reached Antioch where he lived until 382, where he began a more careful study of Christian literature, as opposed to the classics.

To support these Bible studies Jerome learned Syriac and Greek, and a Jewish convert started teaching him Hebrew. He was also instructed in what were then historical methods, and principles of biblical interpretation. In Constantinople in around 379-80 he was impressed by Gregory Nazianzus, who introduced him to the works of Origen, which influenced him significantly.

Back in Rome from 382-5 Jerome used his language skills, especially Hebrew, in working for Pope Damascus, as a theological counsellor and energetic translator, putting some important Greek works into Latin. At Damascus’ request he began updating translations of the existing Latin Bible into a single standard version.

It was at this time that Jerome started giving a series of bible lessons to some Patrician women and girls, on the Aventine Hill with Marcella and Paula, two immensely rich and well-born widows who already practised some austerities. Unfortunately he left Rome in the face of opposition to some of his bible translations, and to what his opponents viewed as excessive advocacy of virginity and asceticism.

After this he went on a very exhaustive pilgrimage with Paula to Jerusalem, parts of the Holy Land and Alexandria, and to the monastic areas in the Nitrian desert. From Autumn 386 he was in Bethlehem to 393, working on his translation of Origen’s biblical commentaries.

In 390 Jerome started an entirely fresh translation of the Old Testament with more research into Hebrew, completing it in 405.

During this time, however, he also pursued various quarrels with an old friend Rufinus, and with the local bishop, against Jovinian and Pelagius, whom he regarded as heretics; he supported Theophilus, the Patriarch of Alexandria, in his attacks on John Chrysostom, which came up in the article on Cyril of Alexandria some months back.

Gordon Mursell, in his History of Christian Spirituality, writes of Jerome as follows:

‘Warm-hearted, kind to the poor and the distressed; easily reduced to tears by their sufferings, Jerome was also inordinately vain and petty; jealous of rivals; morbidly sensitive and irascible; hag-ridden by imaginary fears. His dialogues against the Pelagians and a few virulent letters were his last outbursts.

The problems of his personality, which indicated psychoneurotic imbalances make it difficult to place him in the front ranks of the saints of the ancient church. The extravagance of his campaigns to exalt celibacy above marriage and his feverish studies, not to mention the restless controversies, show the same fateful limitations of his mind.

But he still achieved a work of enduring importance to Christian spirituality. His version of the Old Testament raised the vulgar Latinity of 4th and 5th century Christians to the heights of great literature. His knowledge of Hebrew and his use of contemporary Rabbinic exegesis [= biblical interpretation] contributed to a productive encounter with Judaism like that of Origen in the 3rd century, and for centuries provided an access for western Christianity to the Hebraic truth of divine revelation.. .’

Thomas Merton suggests that the best way into Jerome is through his letters, of which there are many. A good deal seems to have been written about his take on holy virginity, and Thomas Merton was recorded as having opined to his novice students that his advice probably had more relevance to Jerome himself than to the women who were seeking it; J N D Kelly, an expert on the early church, wrote that Jerome was highly sexed both as a student and a young adult, and that his first priority was to avoid temptation, which is not necessarily the first priority for an accomplished and worldly-wise female.

In fairness it must be said that Jerome’s take on virginity was produced at the request of the women who he had been teaching, and who sought his advice on the Christian life, not to mention that they were supporting him financially: a situation that would never be sanctioned nowadays among reputable spiritual directors, nor that, at least in liberal Christian circles, fulminations by men about the behaviour of women are rightly unwelcome, to say the least.

Together with Augustine, Jerome was among the most popular of the early church fathers, and artists went overboard occasionally portraying him as a Cardinal long before the office was instigated. Perhaps the last word has to go to the famous quote from the Renaissance of somebody who, looking at a picture of Jerome flagellating himself, commented that had he not done so he should never have made it as a saint!

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ST FRANCIS of ASSISI; the facts:

Son of a wealthy cloth merchant, Francis was born at Assisi in or around 1182. Originally christened Giovanni in his father’s absence on business in France, Pietro Bernardone insisted on naming him Francesco [= Frenchman] on his return. Little is anything is known of Francis’ mother other than that she was French.

He was taught some Latin and acquired a good deal of French and Francophone culture, which was already in process of migrating to Italy from Provence, with its troubadours, together with literary notions of chivalry. Although he was taught to write he usually resorted to dictation in later life. He had a good singing voice, and seems to have had some competence as a musician, and spent his youth about town with his friends, whilst being put to his father’s business, which he’d have been expected to inherit. Meanwhile it’s clear that he had a happy, even happy-go-lucky disposition, and was renowned for extravagance as for his open-handedness.

In 1202, in response to aggression from the larger neighbouring town of Perugia, a battle was fought in which Francis was taken prisoner, and remained in enemy hands for about a year. Shortly thereafter he suffered a serious illness. He was tonsured in Rome, but never ordained priest: His order was confirmed verbally by the great Pope Innocent II in 1210, and he died on the evening of October 3rd 1226

The process by which his conversion came about was a slow one: he intended to join a military expedition to Apulia, which was, presumably, when his father fitted him out in the best accoutrements available, but it seems that Francis got as far as Spoleto when he turned back, supposedly as the result of a vision.

Following on from this we learn that he exchanged his clothes with a beggar and is recorded as begging alms in French on the steps of St Peter’s in Rome. And it’s at this point that the biographers and hagiographers take over.

It is of vital importance in dealing with any saints, to try to cut through the syrup and the sentiment and get down to the rock; the solid achievements that we can discern as the their legacy to us, and, as with Theresa of Lisieux and our Lord himself, the sentiment and superficial pieties can be a distraction, obscuring and even distancing us from the real person inside the ’packaging.’

Something that came up when we were dealing with Clare was that Francis’ father, Pietro Bernardone, was a rich merchant with high social aspirations for his family, and particularly his son, to the extent that he was happy and proud to have him fitted out with the very best clothes and accoutrements necessary for a knightly lifestyle.

The concept of chivalry in the middle ages is not quite what one imagines from the limited usage of the word today: our principles of sportsmanship and ‘fair play’ have something in common with it, and may be derivative, but the word itself derives from the French ‘cheval’ [= horse], and if you can spare a day of your life to read ‘La Morte d’Arthur,’ written in 1455 by a man filling his time in prison, you’ll probably wonder why you bothered: one knight on horseback charges another; one or both fall off their horse, then go at it with swords assuming they can actually get up in all their heavy armour. A far better read is ‘Don Quixote,’ written 400 years after Francis, with sufficient time having elapsed to be able to thoroughly send up this purely literary expression of ego-centric upper-class machismo.

And this is the social milieu into which Francis’ father was content to propel his son, albeit that he presumably trusted God to bring him back in one piece to carry on the business. It shouldn’t surprise anyone that Francis came to hanker for a more worthwhile lifestyle.

In the light of all this, the incident before Bishop Hugolino when Francis stripped off his clothes and gave them back to his father takes on the significance of a truly prophetic act.

Meanwhile he dedicates himself to Lady Poverty, and we have the rescue of Clare, the damsel in distress, both vestiges of his old aspirations.

The thing to remember from the above is that Francis had next to no formal education, which, on the one hand, enabled him to think in simple terms of the purest holiness he could discern, but on the other, that he lacked the intellectual muscle to carry his message clearly, or to make realistic provision for the future of his order.

Another problem that arises from this accretion of syrup is that it becomes difficult for conscientious biographers to distinguish Francis’ own words, written or spoken, from those that others would have liked him to have said:

‘It was thus that the Lord granted to me, Brother Francis to begin repentance: for while I was in sin it seemed exceedingly bitter for to look upon lepers, but the Lord brought me among them, and I showed them kindness; and as I withdrew from them that which had seemed to me bitter turned to sweetness of soul and body, and not long after, I came out from the world.’

Part of the story that seems perfectly plausible is his townsfolk’s complete misunderstanding of what Francis was experiencing: they thought he’d gone mad.

What does seem thoroughly authentic, however, is Francis’ understanding of the Lord’s command to go and repair a small dilapidated chapel; a practical task that he could accomplish by begging for the necessary stones; it was so often the small practical matters by which God and his son tested those around them; but, of course, ‘Go and repair my church’ carries a far deeper significance.

In what way, then, did Francis ‘repair god’s church?’

* To have placed such emphasis on the intrinsic goodness of creation was of inestimable value in the way that he expressed it then and now and by no means for the church alone.
* The idea of members of religious orders mingling within a local community was certainly not new in the world, but it was in mediaeval Western Europe, and both Francis and Dominic created something that doubtless enriched society, even if it bred some unforeseen and unwelcome results later.
* Whilst Francis himself may not have had very much material goods to share with the poor, his insistence on utter poverty inspired many of his followers to do so.
* His order proved quite indispensable to the set-up of the Poor Clares, which, in itself, was a breakthrough for women in religious orders.
* He set up the first crib, which, however mistakenly, has enriched the life of the church ever since.
* His ‘hermitages’ were not new either, but his ‘rule’ for them was original, introducing the concept of ‘mothers and sons’ among the brothers.
* His emphatic loyalty to church and Pope must have ‘repaired the church’ to some extent, if only because there were many heretical sects around at the time with similar practices.
* Preaching repentance is usually unpopular; sometimes dangerous and rarely effective in terms of numbers reached, but in Francis’ time and place it was as cogently necessary as it is today.

That’s probably enough!

The value of his legacy has been tarnished and compromised not only by Francis’ over-simplicity and lack of foresight, but because, however we might love ‘holy poverty’ as an ideal it has practical limitations you wouldn’t need an economist to explain, but perhaps there are spiritual difficulties with it that sentiment and piety might prevent us from acknowledging.

We’ve already referred to the various heretical sects that were around for the half-century on either side of Francis’ time, but within 70 years of his death the Pope was excommunicating the ‘Franciscan Spirituals’, and at the other extreme Brother Elias had the enormous church built, and decorated by Giotto, so richly that a contemporary jibed that all the friars now lacked was wives!

The pretence that the Pope owned all the order’s essentials had to be amended. Absolute poverty is not only impractical, but there are surely issues of distributive justice involved that become obscured by the ethos of piety that surrounds Francis: why would somebody make themselves intentionally poor in order to beg resources that could be given to people whose needs don’t arise from choice?

If Francis really valued God’s good creation, why did he and his followers deprive themselves of its blessings? Like many saints, Francis’ austerities and those of Clare thoroughly undermined his health: one’s body is a sacred part of God’s creation, so that to abuse or undervalue it seems like ingratitude. One can only say that this was a long-standing tradition going right back to the time of the martyrs, the desert fathers and early monasticism. None of the Gospels record Jesus or his followers practising these austerities on a long-term basis, or compromising their health by so doing, for all that they would have fasted at regular times.

For people intending to live within a community and to be available for spiritual direction the business was already compromised. Reviewing Jerome this week we saw how inappropriate it is to be trying to give conscientious spiritual direction to somebody who’s sustaining the director’s material needs: read the Pardoner’s tale and Bocaccio, and you get to see how difficult it must have been to convict somebody of serious wrong-doing whilst taking their food or even spending time under their roof.

Another problem that arises, and not necessarily as the result of Francis’ lack of formal education, is that, reading the few authentic writings that have come down to us, it’s clear that he was pretty free with his curses of anybody who wasn’t ‘doing it right ’which included people who wouldn’t adhere to the precepts of the church and the Pope, and those who took it upon themselves to alter anything he’d written. He may have been received courteously as a guest by Muslim hosts whose point of honour it was to do so, but, whilst going through the motions of belittling himself in his correspondence, he doesn’t always extend commensurate courtesy to those who disagree with him.

In the long term Francis’ legacy has proved a rich blessing, not only for the holiness that he inspired during his life, but because of the humanity and learning that have emanated from many of the saints his order has produced, even down to Richard Rohr in our time; but perhaps the fullest blessing is the Third Order as we have it today, whereby any Christian who aspires to do so can live a holy life within a guided community, wherever they may happen to be, according to rules set out along Franciscan principles.