

Prayer For All Saints

God of our ancestors who set their hearts on you, of those who fell asleep in peace, and of those who won the martyrs' violent crown: we are surrounded by these witnesses as by clouds of fragrant incense. In this age we would be counted in this communion of all the saints; keep us always in their good and blessed company. In their midst we make every prayer through Christ who is our Lord for ever and ever. Amen.

This brief prayer – redolent with Scripture and rich religious images and allusions – is a small part of a long tradition of piety and liturgical observation.

In 609, Pope Boniface IV dedicated the old Roman Pantheon as a Christian Church under the patronage of the Virgin Mary and the Martyrs. The temple that had been for all gods was now for one God, under the protection of all the saints. Scholars see that this dedication as the deep background of the feast. In the mid-eighth century, Pope Gregory III established November 1 as a day dedicated to the saints.

There rests a profound spiritual truth behind the liturgical observance, a deep spiritual conviction that the Church is more than historical reality instantiated in the here and now. To profess our faith in the communion of saints is to voice our belief in the full – which is to say, Catholic/universal - communion of those baptized in Christ, both present and past. This "Prayer for All Saints" uses two biblical images to express this sense of universality: "the great cloud of witnesses" (from Hebrews 12:1) and the image of prayer rising like clouds on incense (Revelation 8:4, echoing the image in Psalm 141:2).

There is a beautiful moment during the Liturgy of the Eucharist in which the congregation is asked to join the heavenly chorus of angels and saints in a song of praise: "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts..." It is a powerful reminder that we join with the totality of the body of Christ in our worship. That totality can also be called "All Saints." Under the penumbra of the whole heavenly court, the earthly community re-creates, relives, remembers the saving acts of Jesus in every liturgical act – and we will do so until the End, when everything is summed up in what St. Augustine calls "the Whole Christ." We live in history, but we tend toward eternity.

A final note. In the 11th century, the monks at Cluny in France began to observe November 2 as the feast of All Souls, a complement to All Saints. By the 13th century, this also became a universal feast in the Church. It then became commonplace to distinguish the celestial church in heaven from the militant church on earth and the suffering church in purgatory. That tripartite distinction in Christian art is common, but this feast is a salient reminder that we are but one community – "good and blessed company" indeed.

