

*To be a Saint*

*Homily for November 1, 2022*

Shortly after he converted to Catholicism in the late 1930s, the famous writer, monk and former Anglican, Thomas Merton, was walking the streets of New York with his friend, Robert Lax. Lax was a Jew, and he asked Merton what he wanted to be, now that he was a Catholic.

“I don’t know,” Merton replied, adding simply that he wanted to be a good Catholic.

Lax stopped him in his tracks.

“What you should say,” he told him, “is that you want to be a saint!”

Merton was dumbfounded.

“How do you expect me to become a saint?” Merton asked him.

Lax said: “All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one. Don’t you believe that God will make you what he created you to be, if you will let him do it? All you have to do is desire it.”

Thomas Merton knew his friend was right. Merton, of course, would go on to become one of the great spiritual thinkers and writers of the last century. His friend Robert Lax would later convert to Catholicism himself – and begin his own journey to try and be a saint.

But the words Lax spoke ring down through the decades to all of us today. Because they speak so simply and profoundly to our calling as Catholic Christians.

You should want to be a saint. And to be one, all you need is to want to be one.

Of course, if you only want to be a run-of-the-mill, average Catholic, that’s probably all you’ll ever be. Everyone can do just enough to get by. It’s not hard. But the message Christ sends to all of us is an invitation to be something more; to be all that you can be.

Be a saint.

If anyone has any doubts how to do that, St Matthew’s gospel today is a helpful how-to guide. You might call it “Becoming a Saint for Dummies.”

We know it better as the Beatitudes.

“Blessed are...” With those two words Jesus begins a beautiful instruction in how to live the life of a saint. Emeritus Pope Benedict has taken that a step further: in his book “Jesus of Nazareth,” he suggests that the beatitudes are nothing less than a self-portrait of Christ.

It is a portrait of what all of us should aspire to.

To be poor in spirit ... to be meek ... to be merciful.

To hunger and thirst for righteousness.

To be clean of heart and to make peace.

Taken as a whole, the Beatitudes also sum up the beautiful refrain of today's responsorial psalm.

Because "Such are the men who seek your face, O Lord"

This is the people that want to be saints.

Most of us are familiar with the phenomenal saintly stories of the Church. We grew up hearing of how St Peter was crucified, St Paul was beheaded, and St Stephen was stoned; how Francis got the stigmata, or how St George fought the dragon. You hear stories like that and you can't blame Thomas Merton for not really being eager to be a saint. It's not only hard work; it often doesn't have a happy ending.

But those are the stories we hear about. But there are countless stories – millions, throughout the centuries – that we don't. They are the anonymous saints who go about their daily lives quietly, peacefully, joyfully, finally entering into the fullness of grace without doing anything more dramatic than merely choosing to live the Beatitudes.

They are the unsung saints.

In the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, you'll see magnificent tapestries lining the walls. And they really are magnificent – dramatic, realistic, and contemporary depictions of ordinary people of extraordinary character. And they adorn the walls of the cathedral the same way that stained glass windows decorate many of our parish churches and great cathedral churches. In those tapestries, you can see all the familiar saints whose names we know, in a row, facing toward the altar, as if in line for communion. It is – literally and figuratively – the communion of the saints. There is St Nicholas, St Gregory, St Thomas Aquinas, St Francis, St Clare, St John Vianney ... and on and on, with their names over their heads.

But scattered among those saints are people without names – people you won't find in the history books. A teenage girl; children in contemporary clothes; young families. They are the saints whose names are known only to God. It is a beautiful and eloquent depiction of the day we celebrate today: All Saints.

And the message of those tapestries is the message of this feast day: these unknown saints are just as worthy as those who are known. They look like us. They look like people we might pass on the street. If they can be holy, can't we?

To see the tapestries please go to: <http://www.olacathedral.org/>

What does it take to join them?

As Robert Lax explained, to a man Thomas Merton,

All you really need...is to want to.

And God will do all the rest.