

SAINTS OF THE WEEK – ALL SAINTS

Feastday - 1 November

*"Around your throne the saints, our brothers and sisters,
sing your praise forever.
Their glory fills us with joy,
and their communion with us in your church
gives us inspiration and strength
as we hasten on our pilgrimage of faith, eager to meet them.
With their great company and all the angels
we praise your glory as we cry out with one voice:
'Holy, holy, holy...'"*

- Preface for the Feast of All Saints

Since the early centuries of the church the liturgical calendar has reserved one day to honour, collectively, all the saints, both those officially recognized and those known only to God. Thus, we are reminded that the true company of saints is far more numerous than the list of those who have been formally canonized. There are many anonymous saints who nevertheless form part of the great "cloud of witnesses," surrounding us with their faith and courage and so participating in the communion between the living and the dead.

This collective feast, All Saints, is also an occasion to acknowledge the varieties of holiness. Though they share a certain family resemblance, the saints are not formed in any particular mould. Some are renowned for contemplation and others for action; some played a public role while others spent their lives in quiet obscurity. Some demonstrated the vitality of ancient traditions while others were pioneers, charting new possibilities in the spiritual life. Some received recognition and honour within their lifetimes, while others were scorned or even persecuted.

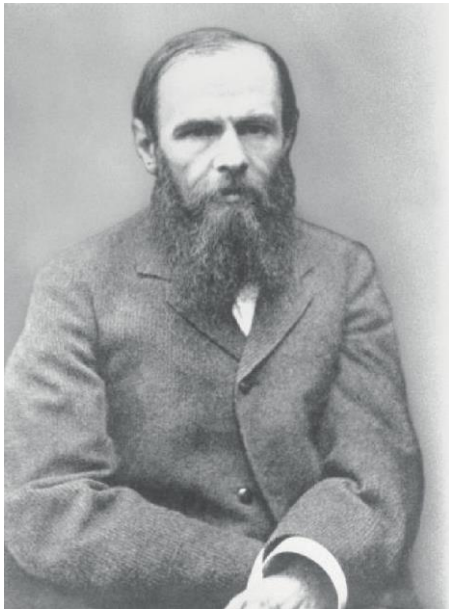
The Feast of All Saints does not honour a company of "immortals," far removed from the realm of ordinary human existence. The saints were not "super" human beings but those who realized the vocation for which all human beings were created and to which we are ultimately called. No one is called to be another St. Francis or St. Teresa. But there is a path to holiness that lies within our individual circumstances, that engages our own talents and temperaments, that contends with our own strengths and weaknesses, that responds to the needs of our own neighbours and our particular moment in history. The Feast of All Saints strengthens and encourages us to create that path by walking it.

‘SAINT’ OF THE WEEK – Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) Russian Novelist – Feast Day: 30 October

"The world will be saved by beauty."

Few writers have matched Dostoevsky's appreciation for the pathos and misery of human existence. Drawing on his own sufferings, he depicted the depths of evil and psychological anguish with vivid, if not morbid, realism. At the same time, drawing also on his own deep, if anguished, faith, Dostoevsky wrote about the meaning of grace, conversion, and the possibility of salvation. Indeed, it is the dialectic between sin and salvation that provides the theme of many of his greatest novels.

Dostoevsky was born in Moscow on October 30, 1821. At the age of sixteen he was enrolled in the school of military engineering in St. Petersburg. It was an uncongenial environment from which his principal escape came in reading novels. After graduation he decided to pursue a literary career. In 1846 he published his first story, *Poor People*, which reflected his lifelong concern for the sufferings of common people. It was an immediate success.



Nevertheless, in 1849 Dostoevsky's literary promise was nearly extinguished when he was arrested and charged with participation in an underground socialist study circle. After some period in prison, he was condemned to death. He was actually tied to a post and came within minutes of meeting the firing squad when the execution was halted by an imperial reprieve. Psychologically, it was a shattering experience that left a permanent mark on his soul. His sentence was reduced to four years of hard labour in a Siberian prison camp. He passed the time among common criminals, an experience that proved invaluable to his later work as a writer. But this period was also the forge of his spiritual convictions. His only book in prison was a copy of the New Testament. From long contemplation on this text, he imbibed such themes as the common human solidarity in the sin of the world, the redemptive meaning of suffering, and the power of Christ's love.

Upon his release from prison Dostoevsky still had to serve several years in a regiment on the Siberian border. There he married a young widow whom he treated disdainfully, only to be racked by guilt after her premature death. He suffered from epileptic seizures. He was a compulsive gambler, and his addiction contributed to his lifelong penury. Nevertheless, in the midst of these circumstances he managed to write with a feverish intensity, producing in a short period such novels as *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Possessed*. In 1867 he married his stenographer, Anna Snitkina, whose love and support provided some balance to his overwrought sensibility. They had four children, of whom two died.

All of Dostoevsky's great novels were marked by a powerful understanding of human psychology and an obsession with certain great spiritual themes. Among these were the nature of evil, the condition of humanity in rebellion against God, and the meaning of salvation. In *Crime and Punishment* his protagonist, Raskolnikov, murders an old pawnbroker simply to test his theory that for superior human beings as he deems himself to be—the ordinary moral code does not apply. Ultimately he cannot run from his guilt. He confesses his crime and must serve his sentence in Siberia. He is followed into exile by a saintly prostitute in whose love and faith reside the possibility of his final redemption.

In his last and greatest work, *The Brothers Karamazon*, Dostoevsky gave particular vent to his religious concerns. The character Ivan Karamazov espouses an intellectually inclined form of nihilism. He rejects the existence of God because of the suffering of the innocent. At the same time, he holds that "*if God does not exist everything is permissible*" (only to be appalled when someone else enacts the logic of this creed). His brother Alyosha, on the other hand, is a novice at the local monastery, a disciple of the saintly Father Zossima, whose story and discourses offer a distillation of the gospel according to Dostoevsky.

Zossima's great theme is the centrality of love, a message that many of his penitents and some of his own monks consider all too simple. Among those seeking his spiritual counsel is a proud rich woman. Zossima counsels her that the solution to her spiritual problems is "*active love*." "*Strive to love your neighbours actively and indefatigably. And the nearer you come to achieving this love, the more convinced you will become of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul.*" The woman responds that she already does love humanity, so much so that she sometimes dreams of giving up everything to become a hospital nurse, a dream she would surely fulfil if it weren't for the abhorrent prospect of having to deal with human ingratitude. In a memorable phrase, Zossima responds that "*love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.*"

Despite his youthful dalliance with socialism, Dostoevsky became deeply suspicious of revolutionary politics. In *The Possessed* he displayed with uncanny prescience the totalitarian tendencies that may cloud the best humanitarian impulses. He anticipated the oppressive effect of any effort to achieve a utopia apart from God. For Dostoevsky authentic community and human fellowship could be founded only on a living faith in Christ.

After years of ill health Dostoevsky died of a haemorrhage on January 28, 1881, at the age of sixty.

Despite his conservative views, Dostoevsky's work remained in the canon of Soviet literature throughout the communist era. Many credited his novels with preserving a space for spirituality in the midst of the official culture of atheism. He had anticipated that the effort to create heaven on earth, at the expense of love, would end by creating hell. **Nevertheless, his prophecy for Russia was ultimately hopeful: "God will save Russia as he has saved her many times. Salvation will come from the people, from their faith and their weakness."**

(both from Robert Ellsberg's wonderful book 'All Saints')