

The Communion of Saints:

The Chosen Family of God

Christians are the family of God. We are described as being adopted through Christ in scripture (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5) and we often refer to one another as siblings in Christ. Jesus, in his last hours on the cross, demonstrates the depth of this familial connection when he gives his mother, Mary, and the disciple John to one another as mother and son. (John 19:26-27.) This relationship shared by Christians means that every baptism is not only the making of a new Christian, but the birth of a new sibling in Christ for all of us. The family gets a little bigger.

By now, God's family is quite large. It's not just the Christians we see walking among us who make up this family. We are people who believe that death is not the end. You and I may be siblings in Christ, but John and Mary, Paul, and every other person ever joined to the life of Christ are also our relations. When we are baptized, all of those great saints of God---the ones whose names we know and the ones known only to God---are given to us as aunts and uncles, grandparents, siblings, relations and ancestors in our faith. We join the ranks of those holy people, all of us alive and dripping wet with living water. As Maxwell Johnson says, "Baptism places into the world a community of displaced people, people on a pilgrimage who really belong nowhere except where they are led, a people sure of their identity as the Body of Christ, as those who always walk wet in the baptismal waters of their origin."¹

Baptism changes us profoundly. We leave behind our old identities, our old lives, and we take on a new life in Christ. When we are baptized, we join the saints. "We are all members of God's holy people in the first sense, members of God's holy people through baptism. We are also invited to become saints in the second sense, people whose lives witness courageously to God's friendship. The saints are those who 'live as if the truth were true.' Their lives point to God as the secret of their being."²

Becoming a Christian, being baptized into this new family, was understood by early Christians as a true rebirth. It not only promised a new life in Christ, but it did away with many aspects of the old life. We can see Christian names spread across regions from the baptisteries that hold the saint whose name is being shared. In cultures with a belief that the position of stars at the time of one's birth determined a personality, baptism was understood to rewrite this fate. Baptism gave the new Christian a protecting spirit, one powerful enough to undo the "conflicting influence of the planets."³

Of course, such a profound change required a degree of vulnerability. The Communion of Saints, that great cloud of witnesses by whom we are surrounded (Hebrews 12:1) is a family into which all have been reborn. None of us start there, we all enter through the sacrament of rebirth. One of the

¹ Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 2007), 451-52.

² Timothy Radcliffe, *Take the Plunge: Living Baptism and Confirmation* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2012), 216.

³ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Enlarged Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 58.

most famous depictions of baptism, the mosaic of the Baptism of Our Lord in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, Italy, shows Jesus being baptized by John. Jesus is entirely naked as his cousin and the Holy Spirit douse him physically and spiritually in the River Jordan. A ritual washing for the forgiveness of sins sounds like something that should involve a degree of vulnerability. And it's probably the spiritual equivalent of getting naked in public. In fact, a fourth-century direction for baptism says that the bishop enters the baptistry and commands the baptizands to take off their clothes.⁴ Men and women were usually separated at this point with (female) deacons attending to the women. Baptisms were customarily conducted at vigil liturgies, so late at night, which would minimize the opportunity for ogling, but just the same, a new Christian's entry to the family of God was made the same way they came into this world the first time: naked, wet, and vulnerable.

We have traditions that emphasize the truth of this new life. We clothe the newly baptized in white garments as reminders of their membership in the eternal life of Christ. They will be numbered among the great multitude around God's throne. (Revelation 7:9-17) Sometimes the baptized are given representations of the saints who they feel close to or whose lives theirs resemble: St Mary Magdalene for pharmacists and hair stylists, St Sebastian for athletes, St Clare for an avid cyclist, St Luke for those who work in healing, and so on. In some communities those being confirmed take on a saint's name as one of their own, representing the depth of this relationship and family resemblance.

In many communities, there is a profound reminder of the presence of the Communion of Saints at the baptism itself. After the presentation and examination of candidates, the Litany of the Saints is sung as everyone processes to the baptismal font. The practice of addressing the saints in a litany is ancient, going back to the fourth century. It is at once a reminder of the examples of Christlike people who have gone before us in the faith, and an invitation to our extended family to be present for this arrival of a new relation.

We benefit from these many examples of what a holy Christian life can look like. "A saint is someone who is becoming the person whom God created them to be. This is why no saint is like any other. We are each unique, but in the saint this individuality becomes visible."⁵ We can only be our full selves, the people that God made us to be, when we live fully in Christ. Our adoption into the life of Christ through baptism, our adoption into the extended family of God with all of the other saints, is an incredible gift. This gift includes not only this most intimate relationship with God, but also means that our fullest life is one that we also share with every other baptized person. The fullness of the communion of saints, the chosen family of God, is what makes us full and whole. The fullness of that communion stretches across geography, cultures, languages, time, and even the barriers that we erect between ourselves. As Kelley Nikondeha says in her 2017 book *Adopted: The Sacrament of Belonging in a Fractured World*:

God's family stretches beyond our smaller notions of biological or ethnic connection. The other is always much closer to being our kin than we imagine. It's the continual work of the prophets and the Spirit to open our eyes to this simple yet astounding truth: Anyone can be

⁴ Aidan Kavanagh, 'A Rite of Passage', in *The Three Days: Parish Prayer in the Paschal Triduum*, ed. Gabe Huck (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 171.

⁵ Radcliffe, *Take the Plunge*, 232.

our family if we let them. With eyes opened, we realize that we are a family so wide with welcome that enemy love is inevitable. Eventually, contrary to the current world order, even our enemy can become our flesh.⁶

In this season, when harvest is ended and winter is not quite arrived, when we look from the Feast of All Saints toward the Reign of Christ on the Last Day, we remember the depth and breadth of God's creation. The same God who knows every person, every creature, every grain of sand intimately also made all things seen and unseen. We consider the wisdom of those who have gone before us in the faith, learning from their experiences of living in Christ, and seeking to find our own way toward living as reflections of Christ in the world.

With this promise and commitment before us, we give thanks to God for the many saints who joined us at our baptisms and have accompanied us on the journey ever since. A chosen family of diverse and amazing people who know what it is to live as a Christian. They remember the joys and struggles, they cheer us on, celebrate our victories, reassure us when we fall, and grieve our losses. In all things, our sibling saints point us on our way, seeking an ever-deeper life in Christ, and offering us a glimpse of the places we will one day stand.

⁶ Kelley Nikondeha, *Adopted: The Sacrament of Belonging in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 154.

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