Solemnity of All Saints, 1 November

Today, the first of November, we celebrate the Solemnity of All Saints.

In Ireland it is called the Solemnity of All Hallows – of all the Holy Ones in heaven. And last night, the eve of All Hallows is called Halloween! I wonder if any of the children here went out 'trick or treating' last night! Or if any children knocked on your door looking for a treat!

On this day, we remember the countless multitude of men, women and children who are now in heaven.

We remember those who have been officially declared saints by the Church, saints with a capital 'S' like St Mary MacKillop, but also many others, including people we have known who, while not officially declared saints, are certainly included among the saints in heaven.

Perhaps you can call some people to mind – maybe your parents or relatives, or teachers, or people in the Chinese Catholic Community – whose lives were an inspiration to you, perhaps for their poverty of spirit, or their gentleness, or their concern for justice, or their purity of heart, or the way they showed mercy, or their courage and faith in difficult circumstances. Maybe a number of these qualities shone out in them.

As one person wrote: On this day, 'we remember the grandmothers who taught us how to pray. We remember the mentors who showed us grace when we didn't deserve it. We remember the quiet, ordinary people who stuffed bulletins, cooked funeral luncheons, held our hands in hospitals, and showed us what the love of God looks like in flesh and blood.'

We need to stress that these people weren't saints on earth – they were human beings with faults and failings like all of us. They had bad tempers sometimes; they made mistakes; they wrestled with doubt. But through their small, ordinary acts of love, through their basic goodness, they brought the kingdom of heaven just a little bit closer to earth.

While the saints are in heaven, they are not distant from us, but very close to us. I personally believe that the veil between heaven and earth is very thin – that we are surrounded by the angels and saints.

I had an experience about 30 years ago while on a wilderness retreat. One of the activities I had to do one night was scale a large steep hill and walk along the top until I came to a cliff edge. When I reached the edge, I was suddenly surrounded by voices, though there was no one else there. What is happening, I wondered. After a while and when I had the courage to walk to the very edge of the cliff, I realised that at the base of the cliff was a camping ground and the voices of campers were coming up the cliff face to where I was. So, while the camping ground was perhaps 200 metres below me, the voices sounded like they were all around to me. A natural explanation.

But within myself I had a different sensation – of being surrounded by relatives and people I had known who had died – all encouraging me to keep on my journey. It was an inner experience of being surrounded by the communion of saints that was as real as the people at the campsite far below me.

Our union with the saints is especially the case when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist which is both a heavenly and an earthly liturgy – in which the Church triumphant in heaven and the Church militant on earth join to offer praise to God. In every Preface at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, we pray in these or similar words: 'And so, Lord, in company with the angels and saints, we sing the hymn of your praise, as without end we acclaim: Holy, holy Lord God of hosts'.

Today is a very good day to call to mind the people we knew on earth who are now in the company of the saints in heaven. May their lives continue to be an inspiration to us, may we feel their closeness. And let us ask them, with great confidence, to continue to intercede for us before our heavenly Father.

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