

What do these people have in common: **Joseph de Veuster** (died in 1888); **Jeanne Jugan** (died in 1979); **Francisco Coll y Guitart** (died in 1875), **Zigmunt Felinski** (died in 1895), **Rafael Arnaiz Baron** (died in 1938)? Perhaps this might help. Joseph de Veuster's statue can be found in the United States Capitol Statuary Hall, one of two from the state of Hawaii. He better know as Father Damien. Jeanne Jugan is better known as Sister Mary of the Cross, founder of the Little Sisters of the Poor. **Francisco was a Spanish Dominican priest** and founder of the Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of the Annunciation. **Felinski was an archbishop of Warsaw** and founder of a congregation of Franciscan sisters. **Rafael Baron, who died at 27 years**, of age was a Trappist monk known for his humility. You've probably already guessed that these people have something to do with today's celebration of All Saints. These are the five people just canonized by Pope Benedict in October. He will canonize another 10 in April. John Paul II canonized more saints than all the other popes put together, hundreds of them. He was criticized by some for making so many. It should be harder, they said. There should be fewer of them, they claimed.

What is a saint? Saints are the creation of God, made for a holy purpose. Saints are ordinary people who have been transformed by divine love extended to them as a free gift. Saints are sinners even. Too often saints seem to be the totally unreal, mostly unapproachable impossibly holy

people, set on pedestals, and thereby set apart from our own experience. Their holiness seems unobtainable by the rest of us. If we start from Scripture, we learn differently. For example, the Apostle Paul address his letter to the Corinthians in this way: "TO THE CHURCH OF GOD THAT IS IN CORINTH, TO YOU WHO HAVE BEEN SANCTIFIED IN CHRIST JESUS, CALLED TO BE SAINTS..." But in his letter he shows that this community of faith is filled with liars, cheats, idolaters, adulterers, and those more worried about prestige and prominence than worship of God. I suppose, not unlike parishioners in many modern parishes. In the New Testament understanding of things, all Christians are called by God to be saints. And we can rightly be called that before we become completely sinless. Perfection for us consists in constantly trying to remove the obstacles to perfection, using the ordinary means given to the Church, prayer, Eucharist, the Sacrament of Penance, the example of the saints, and the like.

How does one become a saint? Is that status attained by sheer force of will, by determination, by the rigor of one's resolution? By none of those things, but solely by the gift of God's grace. To know the love of God, to feel it, even to be overawed by it, that is the beginning of sainthood. Holiness is the renewing, life-changing work of God's Spirit within human beings. It is the Spirit of God within that enables us to attain what we cannot achieve by sheer determination. Sainthood is not a human achievement. To honor the saints, to celebrate a feast in honor of the saints, is to affirm that human

transformation is the work of God, who alone is worthy of our praise. To honor the saints is to give witness to the work of grace shown forth in Christ, grace present to us every day in the ordinary things of life, things involving our work or school, our families our friends, our play, our sports, our leisure, all those things that make up an average human life.

The Canonized saints, the official saints of the Catholic Church are to be seen as gifts from God and examples of transforming grace. They are evidence of grace at work in our midst. The Christ who makes ordinary people saints of God is active also among us, seeking to do the same in us. In honoring those who have been changed by God's love, we honor God and find hope for ourselves.

As the church remembers the "official saints who have gone before us, we are also invited to remember the people in our own lives whose examples are known only to us, but who are surely among the blessed. For example, we remember our own parents and grandparents who showed us the way of faith. They were not people seeking to be famous, but seeking to be followers of Christ. We remember them not just to celebrate what they did in the past, but to recognize in their examples challenges to us to live lives that show forth the glory of God. What does it mean to be a saint of God? It means ordinary people able to do special, extraordinary things through the grace of God. Blessed are they, for theirs is the kingdom of God. And happy, fortunate, blessed are we, for ours too is the kingdom of God. To be invited by God to participate forever in the kingdom of life and

love is what is means to be a saint.