

**I Corinthians 1:1-9** (NRSV) ~ Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind -- just as the testimony of Christ has strengthened among you -- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Matthew 5:1-12** (NRSV) ~ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

## Saints - In - Training

During the early 1980's, my mother served as director of the Women's Division and the General Board of Global Ministries. Because my mother was not employed outside the home at that time, she was available so serve as a Mission and Advance Special Project Inspector on behalf of those bodies. A group of these inspectors would visit every UM Mission site around the world once each four years to ascertain if our funding was being used faithfully, **and** if there was more that the UMC could or should be doing to offer ministry in each situation.

Due to the striking need for recovery work in war-torn Nicaragua, the group of inspectors visited the mission projects in that country for an unprecedented second time. While they were there, a young Catholic priest who had been working with the UM team was killed by the Contras. The group was understandably shaken and confused. On Sunday, a memorial service was held. From the altar, the presiding priest said, "*La paz del Señor sea contigo*" ~ "The peace of the Lord be with you," and people from the congregation, Nicaraguan people, began to embrace these Americans and say,

"Paz" or "Peace." These people who had suffered in so many ways were passing the peace of Christ.

Ron DelBene, team leader, then describes the rest of the memorial service in his book, *From the Heart*. He tells us that during the communion service there was a pause. The congregation was silent. Then someone called out a name. In one voice everyone responded, "Presente!" Another name was called out. Once again the response was, "Presente!" During the service at least twenty names were called out and each time the same response was given: "Presente!" Ron didn't understand what was happening until he heard the name Oscar Romero. Then he realized the congregation was calling out the names of their saints, those who had died, and then proclaiming that each one was PRESENT.

"Presente" is used by school children to answer roll call. At the Lord's table the word "presente" means "in our midst" or "present with us." Shouting "Presente!" in this worship service was a way of proclaiming the reality of the communion of saints.

Although those persons named had died, their presence and influence was still felt.

Today we celebrate All Saints' Sunday. We remember those persons who have influenced our faith development, whose presence is still felt in our lives even though they now rest from their labors. All Saints' Sunday is the church's Memorial Day, a time to remember and give thanks to God for those who have lived and died in the faith.

John Wesley, the 18th Century founder of Methodism, said that the Feast of All Saints was his favorite festival in the church year. It is the one time, more than at any other, when the great chain of witness, from the earliest worshippers of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was emphasized and brought into the present through remembrance. Today, we feel the great cloud of witnesses "Presente!"

With these thoughts in mind, go with me now to a mountain where Jesus is teaching. He begins with a list of Beatitudes. These Beatitudes form a picture of the life of a saint. In the face of difficult life circumstances they persevered in the faith.

They knew what it meant to be poor in spirit.

They had mourned the loss of loved ones.

They were meek, or **broken**, as I would interpret the text.

They hungered and thirsted for righteousness, because so much around them seemed to be filled with evil and hatred.

They knew the need for extending mercy to others who had offended them.

They sought to follow God in their actions, words, and intentions, showing the purity of their hearts.

They endeavored to be peacemakers in the midst of conflicts and violence.

Jesus described persons who trust in God for their ultimate security and inner peace. These persons yearn to follow God's will for their lives. And they stand firm and witness to their faith.

Jesus knew that those he addressed that day would face persecution for believing in him. Jesus knew that living the kind of life that he outlined would be difficult, but promised that the spiritual rewards would be beyond all they could possibly hope for. In Jesus' final beatitude, he tried to forewarn his followers that living a Godly life is sometimes very difficult. *"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute*

*you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,..."*

All through the ages there have been saints who have suffered because of their Christian convictions. They took unpopular stands, but they remained strong in the faith. They did not waver in the face of adversity. Such persons are examples for us. They offer us a word of hope. They endured, and so we can also.

When Margaret Helminski was seven years old, she received a gift from her grandmother. It was a tiny cross on a wisp of a gold chain so fine, its weight was barely perceptible. "Never forget what this cross means," her grandmother said as she fastened it carefully around Margaret's neck.

Over the years, Margaret says, that cross became a part of her, like the lone freckle on her left cheek. She could look at herself in the mirror and not even see it.

As a graduate psychology student, Margaret took a job tutoring at a residential school for emotionally disturbed children. Suddenly surrounded by children who expressed their displeasure by kicking, biting, and screaming, she was terrified, though determined not to let it show.

On her first night there, the head counselor said that three of the boys had asked to escort her to dinner -- **alone!** How would she handle it if all three decided to act out at once? She swallowed hard. She desperately needed this job, so she fought back the panic and walked with her charges to the dining hall.

They passed through the cafeteria line as tantrums and fights erupted around them. Fortunately none of her boys exhibited any kind of behavioral outburst. They made their way to a table in the center of the busy cafeteria and the boys took their seats. Margaret picked up her fork and was about to take the first bite when she noticed that all three of the boys were staring at her. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Aren't you going to ask a blessing?" asked eight-year-old Peter.

"I didn't think I was supposed to," she responded. "This is a state school, isn't it?"

"Yes," said David, his blue eyes brimming, "but you wear a cross."

Her grandmother's words surged to the surface of her memory. "Never forget what this cross means."

Then Roman chimed in, "We thought that meant something."

"It does. Thank you for reminding me," Margaret said, as she bowed her head, no longer afraid. Margaret learned something about sainthood that day. Saints trust in God for their ultimate security and inner peace. Saints yearn to follow God's will for their lives. And Saints stand firm and witness to their faith.

I believe we have all known some very precious Saints. Some of them are with God now. Some of their names we will read today. They were not perfect people, but they trusted God, and yearned to do God's will. They stood firm in their witness to Christ, and shared a positive influence through the living of their days. They have blessed the lives of all who knew them. So that now WE are the Saints-In-Training!

And on this All Saints' Day, I exclaim on their behalf, "**Presente!**"