When we hear the word saint, we think of a St. Peter, a St. Mary Magdalene, a St. Teresa of Calcutta. In the early Church the first saints to be honored were the martyrs. The Church saw that the martyrs were conformed to Christ by dying as he did, by giving their lives out of love for him. And then, when the persecutions ended, the Church broadened its vision of how people live the Christ life. It recognized those great, holy souls who have lived in Christ and inspired us to holiness by the witness of their lives: Augustine, Benedict, Teresa of Avila, Francis Xavier, and so many others.

But actually the vast majority of saints aren’t famous and don’t have churches named for them. They were ordinary people, believers who lived their lives according to the Gospel, and who now are one with Christ in heaven. Today is All Saints Day, and we honor that great throng of unnamed saints, which Revelation speaks of: “a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne… they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” We celebrate those little people like you and me, who through all the ordinary chores and pleasures of life tried to let Christ and his love radiate from their lives. And in fact, we’re not just honoring the saints, but we honor Christ in his saints. We celebrate the victory that he won in the souls of those who followed him.

I would bet that we’ve all known certain souls who were admirable and good, who were quite simply holy. Maybe a grandmother who inspired you with her prayerfulness. Maybe a teacher you remember who was infinitely patient and set a good example of virtue. Maybe a priest who truly was an image of Christ the Good Shepherd to his flock. Maybe a neighbor who was always willing to help out another neighbor in need. These were the ones who lived out what Pope Francis calls “everyday holiness.” They lived holy lives here on earth, and we have great hope that now they enjoy happiness with God in heaven.

Holiness isn’t just for the elite few, the handful of famous souls who have inspired us by their heroic sanctity. No, holiness is for everyone. We are all called to holiness, because we are all called to live the life of grace that God offers to his people. And Jesus gives us a guide, or a plan for this holiness, in the beatitudes of the Gospel. “Blessed are the poor in spirit… Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness… Blessed are the merciful… Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness…” In this passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his followers to holiness, to a new living of the divine law, which boils down to love of God and love of our neighbor. He places us in this world, and gives us the grace to live as his followers by seeking God in all things and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

We might be daunted by the idea of becoming saints. The saints seem so lofty, so far above us, but the word saint just means one who is holy. Just as we are all called to holiness, we are all called to be saints, to be in communion with God here on earth and ultimately in heaven. Think again of those saintly individuals you have known. In their own ways, they lived holy lives. And in our own way too, we are called to live holy and saintly lives. It’s not impossible,
because God desires it, and he offers us every grace we need to live in his divine presence. But he does require our cooperation, our willingness to be one with him, and that happens not only in the big, exceptional things, but in the ordinary stuff of our daily lives. It’s good to remember too that holiness is a journey, it doesn’t necessarily happen all at once. Some of the saints weren’t holy at all in their younger days, but they came to realize their sinfulness and turned their lives around, knowing God is always ready for us to turn back to him if we will. That too should give us great hope, because we’re all a work in progress! God’s grace can make every one of us a saint, if we choose to be.

Do we need to honor the saints? St. Bernard says our devotion doesn’t add the slightest thing to what is theirs. They have no need of honor from us. So, if we venerate the memory of the saints, it serves us, not them. But it is an act of praise and thanksgiving for the love of God, who brought forth holiness in their lives. He touched them with his grace, and now they dwell with him in heaven. So, the saints are an inspiration for us; they prove to us that holiness is within reach, and they teach us by their example how we too can serve God as they did, by living the beatitudes and making God the center of their lives.

The saints also intercede for us when we seek God’s help. We pray for one another here on earth, so why would we doubt that the saints continue to pray for us from heaven? They are the Church triumphant, still united with the pilgrim Church here on earth. They are still part of our family of faith, and our bond with them remains, even though they have entered into eternity. I always like to think of All Saints Day as a family celebration. We rejoice that they have attained the goal of eternal life with God in heaven, and we pray for the day when with God’s help we will join them.