

Pope John Paul II died on April 2nd, 2005, and after his passing over a million people filed past his plain cedar coffin to pay their respects. About four million flooded into Rome to attend his funeral, or to watch the service on giant video screens placed across the city. Around the world, hundreds of millions of people — maybe even billions of people — watched the funeral on television. In Rome, a cry began to spread through the crowd, “*Santo subito ... santo subito.*” The phrase also appeared on hand-painted signs held up by worshipers at the funeral.

Santo subito. Translation: “Sainthood immediately.” The fans of John Paul II wanted the Vatican to cut through its normal red tape and pronounce the pope a saint right away. No delays! Chop-chop! ASAP, with the snap of a finger, in a flash! He’s clearly a saint; they were saying with their signs and their chanting. So, let’s make it official.

According to *Time* magazine, Pope Benedict XVI, moved as quickly as possible to get his predecessor into the ranks of the holy ones. He started by waiving the normal five-year waiting period to begin the process, an exemption that had previously been granted to Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Although there were still a number of steps to take, John Paul II was on the fast track to sainthood — the fastest in history. Apparently, the predictions of vatican-watchers that he would become the fastest Saint to be Canonized were correct for he was declared a Saint roughly 9 years after his death.

As I mentioned at the beginning of our worship this morning, today is All Saints’ Sunday, the day each year we turn our focus to the saints of the church, those great role models for faithful discipleship, who now enjoy everlasting life with God. “In the communion of saints, it seems we can hear the living voice of our beloved John Paul II,” said Pope Benedict during his reign, convinced that

John Paul was communing with the saints in heaven, inspiring and guiding the church from his new location.

Perhaps those of us who have lost loved ones feel the same way? We picture them up in their heavenly home, dressed in white, with halos over their heads lovingly keeping watch over us, waiting for the day when we will be reunited with them. Maybe we even imagine them hanging out with other friends, relatives, and loved who have passed away.

But why is it that people tend to focus on the saints *in heaven*? Take a look at the Bible, and you see that the emphasis is on *the saints who are living right here on earth*. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints.” Whenever Paul speaks of saints, he is talking about members of the church — an *ekklesia*, a group of people who’ve been chosen by God and set apart to do his work in the world. Saints are holy people, according to Paul, but their holiness doesn’t come from achieving some kind of moral perfection. Instead, they have a holiness that comes from being marked as God’s people. God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world,” insists Paul, “to be holy and blameless before him in love.”

God chose us and set us apart — this is such an important insight into saintliness. We know that God is holy, because he is set apart from the world, and different from everything that he has created. Follow that logic, and you discover that we Christians are holy because God has set us apart from the world; and has given us a mission that’s different from our other earthly assignments. To be holy, is not necessarily to be better than other people, just different. Paul writes in Philippians, that we’re saints because we are “in Christ Jesus,” with a mission to produce a “harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.”

Santo subito ... sainthood immediately. The challenge for us is to live a *santo subito* life, among saints who are at work in the church or in the World. As

Disciples of Christ, we are called to serve God wherever we go, whether we are at home, in the office, at school, serving a meal at Friendship House, in line at the grocery store, tying a quilt in the church fellowship hall, or visiting with a friend at a local coffee shop. One of the keys to our Christian identity is that we are holy people, serving a holy Lord.

But what does such a life look like? Paul gives us some clues in our second lesson for today, three Saintly signs from Ephesians, a letter that stresses the holiness of God's people. "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints," he writes, "and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers."

Saint Sign number one: According to Paul is *Faith in the Lord Jesus.* Let's take a moment and unpack these short and very powerful words. What does it mean to have faith in the Lord Jesus? It means trusting that Jesus is the way to God, while also taking seriously that this way to God is a lifetime journey. Researcher Diana Butler Bass reports that at Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church in Seattle, newcomers are invited to take part in a program called "The WAY," a process that is not a quick membership class, but is instead a full year of mentoring and Christian formation. The goal is to help people come into a living relationship with Jesus that takes over the very center of their lives. The Christian life is a life of "continuing invitation," says Joan Henderson, who has been a participant in The WAY — a life in which "Christ calls us to follow." That's what saints do, plain and simple — they follow Jesus on the way to God.

We discover Saint Sign number two in Paul's statement that we are to have a *Love that is directed to all the saints.* But, how can we demonstrate our love for a saint? Take some candles to church and light them on feast days? Mention their names in our prayers of intercession and ring a bell? Post their pictures up on a board during worship? And yet, don't saints already feel love? Does a saint really

need love? After all, these are the first two qualities — faith and love — that are present in a person who has been chosen by God and set apart to do his work in the world.

In the first days of the church, the saints were part of a community of love and concern, one in which love was demonstrated by acts of practical service. One of the first things the early Christians did, was to organize an office of deacons, people that would make certain that widows and the needy got some relief. “Contribute to the needs of the saints,” wrote Paul to the Romans; “extend hospitality to strangers,” he says. Widows in the Christian community were commended for showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, and helping the afflicted. Paul spearheaded a collection for the church in Jerusalem and described it as a special “ministry to the saints.” Today, as in the earliest days of the church, love needs to be more than a word, more than an emotion — it needs to be an act of practical service. And I’m absolutely certain, I’m 100% positive, that we are all well aware that our actions speak louder than our words.

Our third and final Saint Sign, or the third quality of sainthood is a *spirit of wisdom and revelation*. And it is a quality we can all enjoy right here, right now, immediately, no delays, chop chop, in a flash. “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ,” Paul continues, “may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe...” Notice the mention of “hope”, which suggests another approach to our text, based on the three things Paul says we should **not be without** in 1 Corinthians 13, we should abide in “Faith, hope, and love.” People who are saints in this life assume that God is always ahead

of them, not stuck behind them, and they are constantly seeking to learn what God is revealing to them.

A generation ago, entertainer Gracie Allen said, “Never put a period where God has placed a comma.” And there’s a lot of truth to that statement, because it reminds us that God is leading us into a future of new wisdom, new revelations, new understandings, new insights. Don’t put a period where God has placed a comma — saints take this seriously as they look for new revelations every day.

This spirit of wisdom and revelation knows the hope to which God has called us: to the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints. We don’t have to die and go to heaven before we can have this wisdom — we can have it in this world, *santo subito*, as saints immediately. All we need are: Faith in the Lord Jesus. Love toward all the saints. A spirit of wisdom and revelation. These are the keys to a *santo subito* life.

Unfortunately, most people think of sainthood as being an honor granted by the Vatican after a long and complex ecclesiastical process. When a person is proposed for Roman Catholic sainthood, evidence of that person’s virtue must be presented to the hierarchy, along with at least two postmortem miracles — miracles performed by the intercession of the person after his or her death. In the canonization process for John Paul II, officials began looking at the case of Sister Marie Simon-Pierre, a 46-year-old French nun who had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease — the same illness that afflicted the pope. Two months after John Paul’s death, her condition inexplicably disappeared after being encouraged by her mother superior to write out his name, and to say a special prayer, before they celebrated the Holy Eucharist. This led to a thorough examination of her testimony, and an investigation by the church to determine if it was a miracle due to his intercession.

Before sainthood could be granted to John Paul II, there was a trial-like procedure, with a lawyer arguing *against* canonization — this is where the expression “Devil’s Advocate” comes from. Medical doctors also had to testify that the healings were true miracles, unrelated to any scientific intervention. One postmortem miracle is needed for beatification, the first step toward sainthood, and a second is required for canonization. Then, and only then, would the Roman Catholic Church bestow the designation of “saint.” But maybe that is just way too complicated. I believe the saints Paul’s talking about fall into a different category. These saints have faith in the Lord Jesus, love toward all the saints, and a spirit of wisdom and revelation.

Perhaps Paul is talking about all of us here, who have come to church this morning to celebrate on this special day. Postmortem miracles are simply not required for sainthood! For that matter, premortem miracles are not required either. Truth be told, if we can learn to let go, and allow God to work in us and through us to develop faith, love, and a spirit of wisdom and revelation, that will be miracle enough. So, consider yourselves *santo subito*, Saints immediately and live out that reality each and every day! Amen.