

THE MONTH OF SAINTS AND SOULS

We know that the month of November begins with the feasts named in the above title, but it also includes what I feel are an unusually large number of really interesting saints, from Martin de Porres who devoted his life to serving the poor and sick in 17th century Peru to Andrew the apostle. In between these two, we remember Charles Borromeo who lived during the Protestant Reformation and was instrumental in the efforts of the Church to reform itself at the Council of Trent. Next we come to Pope Leo the Great who deserves that name for his 5th century efforts to clarify the true nature of Jesus as both fully divine and fully human. Martin of Tours comes next in the November calendar of saints. Conscripted as a Roman soldier at the age of 15, he became what we would call a conscientious objector at 23, refusing to accept a bounty for a battle victory and insisting that the money should be given to the poor.

Chicago's own Frances Xavier Cabrini is celebrated toward the middle of November. Her tireless work for the poor and sick is legendary, with the founding of 67 institutions around the world, ranging from orphanages to hospitals. Margaret of Scotland, whose grave I've visited in Dunfermline, Scotland, is celebrated a few days later. Although she was a queen, she paid special attention to the poor of her land, with tradition attesting to her determination to never eat a meal without first feeding nine orphans and twenty-four adults. Elizabeth of Hungary, who lived in the 13th century, was the daughter of a king and the wife of a nobleman. But like Margaret of Scotland, she spent her short life (married at 14 and dead at 24) serving the poor by using her husband's wealth to buy bread for the hungry and taking that simple food to them each day.

Moving toward the end of the month, we come to St. Cecelia, one of the earliest and most revered of all Roman martyrs, although we know almost nothing about her aside from the fact that she was named and honored from the earliest days of Christianity. For unknown reasons, she remains the patron of musicians, perhaps because depictions of her in Renaissance art show her with a viola or small organ. The month of November ends with the feast of Andrew, apostle of Jesus and brother of Peter. Despite being one of the Twelve, we know little about his life in the early Church aside from the tradition that has him preaching the Gospel in modern day Greece and Turkey, and being crucified on an X-shaped cross.

To be sure, the calendar of saints in every month of the year can provide us with amazing stories of faith and impressive examples of courage, sacrifice and generosity. But as I say, I've always found the November saints to be particularly inspiring, perhaps in part because they could have lived comfortable, even luxurious lives but chose instead, as Robert Frost would say, to take "the road less traveled by." And that made all the difference.

Fr. Bob