



BEN LANSING AND
D. J. MAROTTA

OUR CHURCH SPEAKS

AN ILLUSTRATED
DEVOTIONAL OF
SAINTS FROM EVERY
ERA AND PLACE



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PREFACE

IN THE FALL OF 2016, the Lansings sat on a couch in the Marottas' living room to talk about a new church that was beginning in the heart of the city of Richmond, Virginia. Questions were asked, fears were shared, and prayers were prayed. By the end of the night, both couples sensed with confidence that we would share in the work of church planting together. And so we have. Over the years, the church has grown, and what began with apprehension has blossomed into true collaboration, friendship, and kingdom fruitfulness.

We share this because we want our readers to know that this book was born out of the colaboring we have shared in church together. Ben's work as a deacon and his love for art, history, and liturgy fueled his creation of the artwork, historical narrative, and the selection of the prayers in this book. Dan's experience as a priest, counselor, and church planter informed his pastoral insights as he wrote this book's devotional reflections. This book represents much of how we have walked with each other, sought to minister the gospel in our city, and helped each other grow in Christ over the years.

So think of reading this book as pulling up a third chair and joining the two of us at the table for a conversation. Welcome!



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INTRODUCTION

SAINTS OVER CELEBRITIES

WE LIVE IN THE AGE OF THE CELEBRITY.

Not that there haven't always been famous men and women. Every age has its jealousy-inducing fashionistas, heroes, and royalty. Success plus wealth plus stunning good looks is a winning formula no matter where or *when* you live. But the uniqueness of our time is found both in the sheer number of celebrities (thank you, internet) and in the desire of nearly every young person to become a celebrity (again, thank you, internet). Study after wearying study reports that the number one goal of most people under the age of thirty is not to cure cancer, or revitalize their hometown, or marry their high school sweetheart, but rather to be famous—to be a celebrity, to be recognized and praised for doing something rather than simply to do the thing.

This shift does two abominable things to the human soul:

1. It transforms virtue into vanity with such subtlety that the doer does not realize the target has moved.
2. It generates anxiety *ex nihilo*.

Now the doer must fret and fluster their way through the day trying to seduce their neighbor into worshiping them and feel no small amount of stress when outperformed by thousands of someones they have never met.

We are indeed stressed-out demigods.

The tonic for our vanity ulcers is not purchasing the latest habit-tracking daily planner (though I do love a good planner), embarking on a kale-only diet (is that even possible?), or chucking your smartphone into the Atlantic



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(tempting). Rather, we need to tune the frequency of our souls to the still-broadcasting song of the gospel being sung by the lives of men and women throughout the history of the church.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Saint Valentine, Saint Patrick, and Santa Claus—for many modern Christians, these may be the only recognizable names outside of Bible characters from two thousand years of church history. We know these names because of the civil calendar, though the memory of these saints has been secularized into consumerist oblivion.

Some of us may be well versed with Scripture but largely unacquainted with any Christians from the two millennia that separate us from the time of the apostles. Most of us are likely unaware of an ancient tool that Christians have used to rehearse this long history as a part of their daily lives, a tool called the *Calendar of Saints*.

THE CALENDAR OF SAINTS

Two thousand years ago, Christians were often hunted down and killed. Amid this darkness, the church began a radical practice. When a brother or sister was martyred for faith in Jesus, the Christian community remembered their date of death as an occasion for celebration and thanksgiving to God. This was a new birthday, when the beloved's body entered the grave in anticipation of resurrection and victory in Christ. The saints were not cherished for inherent moral perfection or superhuman niceness. They were broken and flawed, just like anyone. But their memory was preserved because, in their struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil, the glory of Christ was particularly evident.

After many centuries, the calendar was filled with thousands of commemorations of martyrs and other faithful Christians and became known as the Calendar of Saints. The Christian liturgical calendar—with its



seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time—and the Calendar of Saints functioned as complementary, daily rehearsals of the life of Christ and Christ’s bride, the church. These rehearsals grounded the believer in what it meant to be in Christ as a part of his people.

By the Reformation of the sixteenth century, many Christians were concerned that celebrating saints had become a distraction from God’s glory. This concern was not without reason; some people became so enamored of the cloud of witnesses that they forgot that the cloud should point the believer to Jesus, “the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). Many Protestants abandoned the Calendar of Saints, and their church traditions lost a critical tool in rehearsing their history as part of the daily rhythms of life. The memory was lost. Today, many Christians feel rootless and deconstructed. We would benefit from reintroducing the Calendar of Saints, rightly contextualized around Christ.

The Calendar of Saints from which we draw in this book is populated by the broad scope of trinitarian Christianity, with representatives from various denominations and traditions. All are portrayed as members in the body of Christ, unified in his love and grace.

UNITY AMID DIVISION

In this divided world, it’s tempting to be skeptical of this assumed unity. We can’t ignore all of the conflicts between Christian denominations. Does presenting the saints of various traditions together give a false view of unity within the church?

In an essay titled “On the Reading of Old Books,” C. S. Lewis (Anglican author of *Mere Christianity*) addressed this question. He mentioned the writings of many saints who had inspired him, including the ancient church father Augustine, the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, the Puritan John Bunyan, the Anglican reformer Richard Hooker, and the Roman Catholic counterreformer Francis de Sales. Lewis commented:

They are, you will note, a mixed bag, representative of many Churches, climates and ages. . . . The divisions of Christendom are undeniable and are by some of these writers most fiercely expressed. But if any man is tempted to think . . . that “Christianity” is a word of so many



meanings that it means nothing at all, he can learn beyond all doubt, by stepping out of his own century, that this is not so. Measured against the ages, “mere Christianity” turns out to be no insipid inter-denominational transparency, but something positive, self-consistent, and inexhaustible. . . . We are all rightly distressed, and ashamed also, at the divisions of Christendom. But those who have always lived within the Christian fold may be too easily dispirited by them. They are bad, but such people do not know what it looks like from without. Seen from there, what is left intact despite all the divisions, still appears (as it truly is) an immensely formidable unity.¹

Lewis’s message is convicting. Denominational divisions are undeniable and often exist for real and substantive reasons. It would be a mistake to assume that achieving perfect unity in the church is any easier than achieving harmony in the deep divisions of any other family. Yet for those who spend time grappling with important theological nuances, Lewis reminds us that the church, in all its traditions, continues to hold a profound unity that has remained constant throughout the centuries and traditions.

MEETING OUR FAMILY

This vision of the church inspires the art in this book. Here is the church in raw honesty, with all its conflicts, divisions, and family squabbles. And yet, holistically, it is still a family of *immense, formidable unity* in Christ Jesus.

The art series *Our Church Speaks* and the selection presented in this book can help restore the memory of these saints and the words they have passed down to us. In this art series, we see the broad scope of the family of Christ. The online *Our Church Speaks* consists of over 250 portraits, with more on the way. Fifty-two of these portraits were chosen for this book, one saint or group of saints for each week of the year. Others can be viewed at www.ourchurchspeaks.com.

This book’s “cloud of witnesses” are deacons, priests, and bishops. They are artists, poets, and musicians. Rulers and enslaved. Men and women. Monks and parents. Children and elderly. They are converts from various world religions. They are Baptists, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Eastern Orthodox, and Methodists. They are from every



inhabited continent and all twenty centuries of the church's history. If you are a baptized Christian, this is the family of Christ you are reborn into. This is our church, and it continues to speak today. May the lives and words of these saints inspire us, challenge us, and urge us on as we "run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

It is said that those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it. Oh, if only that were true! Then we might accidentally become another Harriet Tubman or Augustine of Hippo without doing anything! Let it rather be said that those who do not know history are doomed to wallow in the worst parts. History is not all futility and tragedy. There are lighthouses built along the rocky shoals, and the attentive voyager may navigate treacherous waters by them.

The saints of the church flicker like candles along a dark corridor. They are not 1400-watt LED floodlights to blind you with their brilliance; those are the celebrities. A celebrity is a flashbulb straight to the cornea.

The celebrity demands, "Look at me!"

The saint whispers, "Look to God."

The celebrity says, "Try to be like me, but you'll never be like me."

The saint says, "Why would anyone want to be like me? Who has God made *you*?"

The celebrity is ever ascending, climbing the tower of Babel to the double-platinum throne.

The saint is ever descending, saying, "Please have my seat, I insist."

The celebrity offers you everything you want but can never have.

The saint offers you the thing you fear but will redeem your soul.

The celebrity is a Ferrari screaming down the highway with music blaring.

The saint is the freshwater creek beside the highway that almost nobody ever notices and is nearly impossible to hear over the roar of traffic.

Yet the water murmurs as it wanders over stones and around oak roots. It is not silent.

Our church speaks. Those who have ears, let them hear.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK AS A PRAYER TOOL

The historic church has regularly commemorated the saints with thanksgiving and praise to God for their life and witness. You can continue this tradition with this short liturgy.

Turn to any saint's entry in this book. You may want to select an entry with a commemoration day closest to your current date. Then begin:

Opening Prayer (based on Psalm 51:15): O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. Glory be to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forever and ever. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Read aloud the passage of Scripture associated with the saint of the week. Consider exploring the broader context of this passage by reading the entire chapter in your Bible.

Reflection: Take time for a period of silence and stillness. Consider the following reflection points about the entry. (You may want to take only one reflection point per day, giving yourself a full week of prayer and reflection.)

- Read the saint's quotation and contemplate its meaning. Are there implications that speak to your life circumstances?
- Study the details of the artwork. What stands out to you?
- Read the saint's biography. What do you find convicting, challenging, or inspiring about their story?
- Consider how the Scripture reading speaks to the life and work of the saint.
- Read the associated devotional reflection.
- Ask the Holy Spirit how he may be leading you, considering what you have read.
- Pray the entry's accompanying prayer of thanksgiving for God's power, manifested in his saints.

The Lord's Prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Closing Sentence: Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to him from generation to generation in the church, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen (based on Ephesians 3:20-21).²





BISHOP OF CONSTANTINOPLE AND
TEACHER OF THE FAITH (c. 329-390)

Commemoration: January 2

Time: Fourth century

Place: Cappadocia (now Turkey)

As a fish cannot swim without water, and as a bird cannot fly without air, so a Christian cannot advance a single step without Christ.¹



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At a pivotal time in church history, God called an aspiring poet named Gregory to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Though ministry was not Gregory’s first chosen vocation, God used him mightily to minister to the church and equipped him with good friends who stood by his side in his important calling.

Gregory of Nazianzus was the son of Greek landowners in Cappadocia (now central Turkey). His mother had been a Christian for many years. His father converted to Christianity a short time before Gregory’s birth and served the church as the bishop of Nazianzus.² Young Gregory had no interest in the burdens of life as a clergyman and instead wished to become a poet and scholar. But his perspective began to change while journeying to Athens to study rhetoric. His ship hit a furious storm, and all aboard feared their end had come. In this moment of desperation, Gregory dedicated his life to Jesus Christ. The ship was spared, and Gregory arrived safely in Athens.

In Athens, Gregory studied alongside Basil and Julian, who would come to play significant roles in Gregory’s life:³ Basil became Gregory’s lifelong best friend; Julian, a nephew of Emperor Constantine the Great, would become one of Gregory’s greatest foes.

After several years of study, Gregory and Basil were urged by their families to redirect their career ambitions. Gregory’s father appealed to him to assist with the needs of the church of Nazianzus. Basil, who had hoped to become a celebrated lawyer, was encouraged by his sister, Macrina, to devote himself to prayer and ministry.

Able and faithful ministers were certainly needed, as the church faced challenges without and within. Gregory’s old schoolmate, Julian, became emperor and renounced Christianity, vowing to uproot the faith and replace it with Roman paganism. Meanwhile, a significant dispute spread within the church about the nature of Jesus. Who really was Jesus? Was he created or was he the eternal Creator of all things? The Council of Nicaea had attempted to settle this dispute many decades earlier by drafting a creed of scriptural answers to this question. The Nicene Creed affirmed that Jesus was “of the same substance” as God the Father and one of three persons within the Trinity. But many in church leadership later compromised the faith and undermined Nicaea’s teachings. For a



time, it seemed only one elderly bishop, Athanasius, was left to defend the Council of Nicaea's theological language.

Gregory and Basil initially resisted the call to make a stand during this critical moment. But in time, they acknowledged that the Lord was indeed calling them to redirect their ambitions. Gregory, Basil, and Basil's siblings fully devoted themselves to defending the ancient apostolic faith, as summarized by the Nicene Creed. This band of friends became bishops, theologians, and monastic leaders known today as the Cappadocians. Through dedicated prayer and service, they preserved and advanced the Christian faith.⁴

Gregory was noted for his beautiful writings and sermons and revered for his just leadership. As an old man, he was made bishop of Constantinople, then the largest city on earth. A new church council met in Constantinople to affirm the teachings of Nicaea. Gregory's theological clarifications about the Holy Spirit became part of the council's expanded version of the Nicene Creed. And Gregory never abandoned his love of poetry, despite his career shift toward ministry. His theological and autobiographical poems became powerful and enduring expressions of trinitarian faith.

SCRIPTURE

"Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.'" (John 8:58)

MEDITATION: THE KING HAS BECOME YOUR FRIEND

The old heresies never really die; they evolve. Arianism is an ancient heresy that defines Jesus as a divine creation and certainly not coequal with God the Father. While most people in the world are Arians, what's interesting is that today many self-proclaiming Christians are private Arians as well. This may be true of you even if you've never heard of Arianism or of Gregory of Nazianzus's labors against it.

Private Arianism shows up in an overly cozy, chummy relationship with Jesus that is not counterbalanced with fear, awe, respect, submission, and worship. Private Arianism looks like Jesus as: buddy, therapist, life coach, helper, prayer answerer, spouse finder, raise getter.



Point of clarity: of course, Christ can accomplish all these little things and more, but the problem with this kind of friendship with Jesus is that it just isn't worth very much. Jesus is one friend among many. It's not bad, but it's not great either. It's like frozen yogurt. It's just . . . okay.

The upside of orthodoxy (theological orthodoxy is actually full of upsides) is that if you behold Jesus as capital G-O-D and recognize the carpenter from Nazareth as the creator, sustainer, and ultimate judge of all things, then you must, *must* fall down before him in complete and utter submission.

If you reach this point, you will experience the most wonderfully surprising of privileges: the King shall stretch forth his hand and raise you up and embrace you.

You see, in Jesus, the King has become your friend. This kind of friendship is vastly more weighty, substantive, and valuable than the first kind.

The cozy counselor/friend? Not worth much. The Lord of the universe calls you friend? Worth everything.

PRAYER

Almighty God, you gave your servant Gregory of Nazianzus special gifts of grace to understand and teach the truth revealed in Christ Jesus. Grant that by this teaching we may know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.⁵



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