

# Celebrating the Patronal Feast, Evangelizing the Community

Richard N. Fragomeni

## A PRACTICE ROOTED IN TRADITION

In Schenectady, New York, every July 16 that I can remember, La Festa della Madonna del Monte Carmelo, the patronal feast day, was a religious solemnity to celebrate at the parish and a festival of food and entertainment for the whole city to enjoy.

Perhaps it was just cultural, an Italian nostalgia for the old country. For me, however, as a child, it was a glimpse of heaven in the hot, humid summer. The festival arrived as a visitation of maternal love, an epiphany of sorts. The statue of Mary holding the child was processed through the streets of the neighborhood, offering passersby the brown scapular. We had already received the scapular on the day of our First Communion. But during the feast day, she moved among the crowd, offering it to us once again. The brown scapular that I wore faithfully, day and night, was Mary's promise of eternal salvation to those who cherished it. This pledge was made from Mount Carmel, the site in the Holy Land where the prophet Elijah told the people to choose the Lord or the idol Ba'al, and where it is said that, centuries later, Mary appeared to the Carmelite St. Simon Stock.

Each year, the parish community prepared for this festival with nine days of prayer, morning and evening. The novena was the long-standing tradition of many communities of faith. We prayed several novenas during the year, all preparing for the feast of an important saint or a holiday.

There was a novena for Christmas, one for St. Rocco, whose little dog fascinated me; one for St. Gennaro, or Januarius, whose blood boiled each year in Naples on his feast, September 19. Of course, a perpetual novena was made to St. Anthony each Tuesday evening, all year long. It was well-attended by those who had lost items. The apex of the St. Anthony Tuesdays was the veneration of the relic of St. Anthony, a sliver of his bones, that had come from his shrine in Padua, Italy. Kissing or touching this relic offered a sense of closeness to this great intercessor. Divine assistance was not far away.

But the novena of all novenas was prayed July 7 to 15 each year, without fail. This was the nine-day overture for the optional memorial of our patroness, Our Lady of Mount Carmel. As a child, I was the church organist and provided the musical



The celebration of the patronal feast can be a rich resource for evangelization.

accompaniment for both novena services: morning in Italian and evening in English. This work provided me with a meaningful part of this enchanted world.

As the days of the novena progressed, the crowds both in the morning and evening got larger. On the last night, which we called *La Vigilia*, the church was so packed and without air conditioning, so humid, that one could hardly breathe. To add to the body temperature of the devotees, literally thousands of votive candles were lighted around the statue of Mary. This would be

the statue that would be processed around the neighborhood the next day. The only semblance of relief from the distraction of the heat was the perfume of rubrum and royal lilies that filled the place with an uplifting fragrance of heaven.

When July 16 fell on a Sunday, the Masses were packed just as at Christmas and Easter. The regular Sunday readings and prayers were left behind for the readings and prayers of the memorial. No ordinary Sunday could ever compete with the power of our parish name day—our *onomastico*, in Italian. That is how it was.

The night of the festival was like the night of a thousand stars. At the conclusion of the procession with the statue of Mary, the image would be returned to the church. Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament would begin. Incense, candles, bells, singing, and fireworks were part of this solemn ritual.

That's right, fireworks. As Monsignor Spina blessed the assembly with the monstrance, a signal was given to people outside who would detonate the vast array of explosives that filled the darkening sky with colors and sounds and cascades of light.

Those standing outside, since there was no room in the church, were heard to cry out with joy to the Madonna and to her son, Christ, the Light of the World. It was as if Mary had appeared in the sky, manifesting the wonder of light on her children at prayer.

The outdoor booths of food, drink, and religious objects for sale remained open until midnight. People from all around the city made the pilgrimage to the parish for the July commemoration. I still have a small image of Our Lady of Mount Carmel that I purchased at one of those festivals. This fine piece of vintage religious art was bought with money I had earned playing the organ for the novena that year.

Ours was not the only parish that had such festivities for the titular saint of the church. At the time, Schenectady touted at least five festivals: ones that honored St. Anthony, Assumption of Mary, St. Helen, St. Anne, and St. Adalbert.

It seems that churches punctuated the year with these festivals, making the secular calendar transparent to a divine space and time that was populated by holy women and men who brought hope, promise, and community to people who longed for God.

## CELEBRATING THE SAINTS TODAY

This essay offers an invitation to look at the possibilities for how parishes today can celebrate the feast of the parish saint with renewed vigor. What happened in Schenectady cannot occur again. However, the enthusiasm of an older time still can be transposed into a new and vibrant expression of devotion. This devotion can be a source of renewal for the church and a rich resource of evangelization.

First, we will examine the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines* (DPPL), published by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in 2001. Next we will look at a brief history of the origin of the devotion to patron saints. The pertinent section of the *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* will be considered, and the essay will conclude with pastoral suggestions for the celebration of patronal saints in the parish.

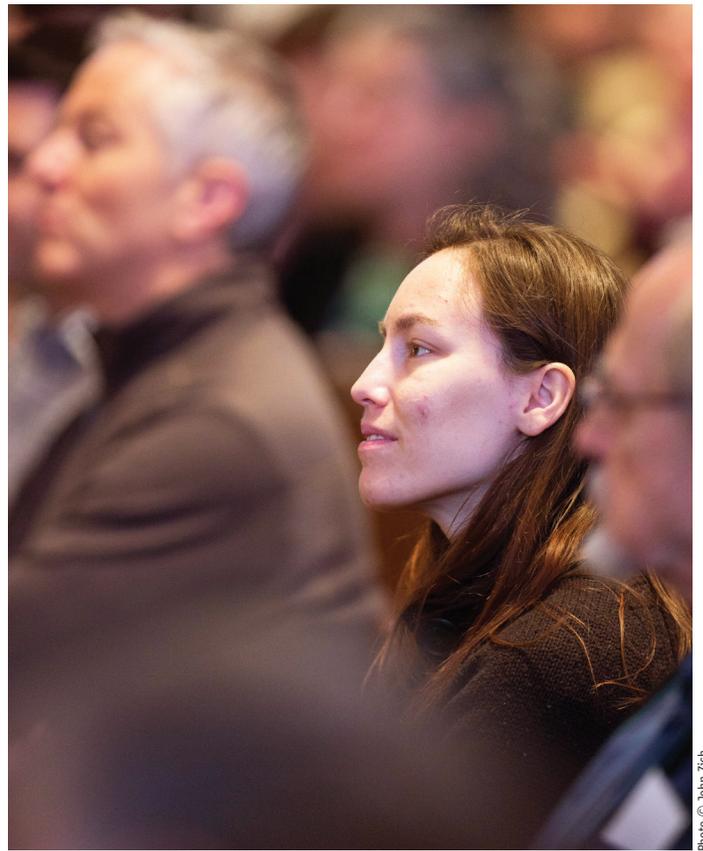


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The *Directory of Popular Piety* notes that celebrating the saints awakens the dimension of transcendence in the faithful.

## The Directory of Popular Piety and the Liturgy

The DPPL encourages and informs the development of the devotional dimensions of Catholic life as it can intersect with the liturgical rituals of the Church.

After an extensive introductory section that examines the theological principles of Catholic liturgy, the DPPL outlines a history of devotional practices, along with a set of principles for the evaluation and development of popular piety in local settings. The next section offers specific recommendations and suggestions for the liturgical year, covering each of the seasons and festivals that unfold during the seasons. These recommendations can be quite thorough and are worth liturgical ministers' examination. The directory then offers a lengthy section on the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Chapter 6 provides an outline of the development of veneration of the saints and the beatified of the Church. The remainder of the document covers the Church's devotion and prayers for the dead and concludes with a section on shrines and pilgrimages.

Chapter 6 of the DPPL is of specific interest for us. After offering principles for the veneration of the saints, it describes the practices of honoring and praying to the angels, St. Joseph, and St. John the Baptist, and then the forms of the Church's veneration of the saints in the liturgy.

Paragraphs 226 to 247 provide the theology for honoring the saints then outlines suggestions for how this may be expressed in local parishes. Several points are noteworthy. First, the honoring of the saints is a long-standing practice in the



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## A Longing for Divine Assistance

In *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), Peter Brown writes on the development and history of devotion to saints and the celebration of patron saints. Brown makes four important points that I believe can assist us in understanding and reclaiming the importance of the patron saint's festival in our parishes.

First, Brown claims that Christianity grew up in a world where there was a fault line between heaven and earth. In other words, the two are separate realities. The early Christians believed that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ opened an entry into heaven. Now it was possible for heaven to be wedded to earth.

Second, because of the violent deaths of the early martyrs, and because these deaths were associated with the violent death of Christ on the cross, the graves of

the martyrs were seen to be portals into the heavenly round. The tombs of the martyrs were seen as imminent doorways into the power of heaven. This belief grew strong, so the true names of the martyrs became destinations of pilgrimage. As a result, ancient cities grew strong around cemeteries as Christianity became the accepted faith of the era in the empire.

Third, these martyrs gradually became to be understood as patrons along the line of the Roman *patronus*—that is, a person who had authority and power and who could lend protection to those in need. In the benign way of heavenly patrons, these early martyrs could lend invisible protection for healing strength to all who sought their patronage. Church buildings were built over the tombs of the saints in great power; “clean power” as Brown calls it, was implored from these patrons and their festivals were kept with great honor.

As Christianity spread, and as people were no longer able to make pilgrimages to these grave sites, the custom grew up of sending a portion of their bodies in reliquaries to other parts of the empire. These reliquaries were cherished in monasteries and churches and were coveted because they were also sources of revenue for the cities that were growing around. There was a sense that by becoming one with the patron saint by touching their relics, a person could enter the kingdom of heaven and find strength in times of distress.

Fourth, Brown notes how the Black Death served to promote devotion to heavenly patron saints. The Black Death was a horrible way to die, and since the martyrs had died in a horrible way as well, it made sense to believe that they could intercede for those suffering from this disease. Christians looked for the saints' patronage in the presence of their relics and in their memories and in their portal to heavenly power.

Though our world has changed since late antiquity, we still long for divine assistance. Our Catholic imaginations are a fertile ground in which live the inspiration of our Christian ancestors: that in Christ we are not alone. And while the saints

A procession becomes a prayer in motion for the intercession of the patron saint.

Catholic tradition. From the earliest days, the martyrs were given the special place of honor as part of the great mystery of Christ. Second, in memorializing the saints, the Church proclaims the great communion that links the living and the dead in the great mystery of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Communion of Saints proclaims boldly that we are not alone, that we are not saved alone, that we do not dwell alone. God dwells with us and shares his promise of eternal life with all creation. And third, the DPPL states in paragraph 232:

A “Saint’s day” also has an anthropological significance: it is a feast day. The feast also echoes vital human needs, and is deeply rooted in our longing for the transcendent. The feast, with its manifestations of joy and rejoicing, is an affirmation of the value of life and creation. The feast is also an expression of integral freedom and of the human tendency toward true happiness, as it interrupts the daily routine, formal conventions, and need to earn a living. As a cultural expression, the feast highlights the particular genius of the certain people and their cultural characteristics, and their true folk customs. As a social moment, the feast is an occasion to strengthen family relations and to make new contacts.

Of special interest in this paragraph is that the celebration of the festival of saints—for instance that of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Schenectady, New York, many years ago—deepens our faith and offers the participants a sense of communion in the midst of the tedium of life. It serves both a religious and a human need. As a festival of faith, it awakens the promise that there is something more than simply the alert problem-solving dimensions of life. It awakens what the document calls the dimension of transcendence. It leads us to see that here and now there is more to life than meets the eye. And in the Communion of Saints we are together in an enchanted universe.

are not only martyrs but also men and women who have dedicated their lives to the Gospel in a variety of ways, they can continue to inspire us. We believe that these members of the Communion of Saints accompany us and inspire us to proclaim the power of Christ. In this regard, the tradition of the Church continues to give us ways to find in the saints living witnesses for our pilgrim way.

## The Liturgical Calendar

In 1969, Pope Paul VI approved the reformed norms for the liturgical calendar. This document, the *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, found at the beginning of *The Roman Missal*, offers a theology of time and the rationale for the liturgical feasts and seasons.

In chapter 2, under title 2, The Proper Day for Celebrations, the Table of Liturgical Days is provided. From both pastoral and practical perspectives, this table is significant since it lists the festivals of the Church and their liturgical observances according to precedence. In other words, it gives the possibilities that are often forgotten or omitted in local parishes.

One such possibility is for the transfer of the patronal feast day of the parish, which may fall during the week, to a Sunday in Ordinary Time. The possibility of such a transfer is obvious when it is noted that the Sundays in Ordinary Time rank sixth in order, but that Proper Solemnities are ranked at number four. The table reads:

4. Proper Solemnities, namely:
  - a) The Solemnity of the principal Patron of the place, city, or state.
  - b) The Solemnity of the dedication and of the anniversary of the dedication of one's own church.
  - c) The Solemnity of the Title of one's own church.
  - d) The Solemnity either of the Title  
or of the Founder  
or of the principle Patron of an Order  
or Congregation.

The title of the parish church is ranked as a solemnity, as is the patron of the parish; therefore, they may be celebrated on those Sundays, with the entire parish community gathered.

Further permission for this transference can be found in paragraph 58 of the Universal Norms. It reads:

For the pastoral good of the faithful, it is permitted to observe on Sundays in Ordinary Time those celebrations that fall during the week and that are agreeable to the devotion of the faithful, provided the celebrations rank above that Sunday in the Table of Liturgical Days. The Mass of such celebrations may be used at all the celebrations of Mass at which the people are present.

Here we have one of the best kept secrets about observing the saints and keeping their feast days annually. It is clear from this document that during Ordinary Time, any patron saint or



Displaying the patron saint's relics in a reliquary will draw attention to the feast.

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titular feast of a parish can be celebrated on a Sunday as a pattern of a solemnity. It also seems that this is a general norm and can be decided by the local pastor and parish leadership team. No other permission needs to be obtained.

But what happens in the case of a saint of the parish whose feast falls during Christmas Time or Easter or Lent or Advent? This is not so easy.

When the revision of the calendar occurred in 1969, the reformers of the liturgy were careful to place as many saints' feasts into other parts of the liturgical year, so that they may be celebrated with due solemnity. But in spite of their efforts, some saints' memorials and feasts still fall during Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter Time.

In these cases—for instance, the Optional Memorial of St. Patrick—the Sundays of Lent may never be substituted. However, a parish dedicated to St. Patrick might want to move the solemnity to the closest Saturday. According to the table, the weekdays of Lent, along with the Advent weekdays from December 17 to 24, are ranked at number nine. The weekdays of Advent before December 17, and the weekdays of Easter Time following the Easter Octave, are ranked at number thirteen.

In all cases, keeping the memory of the patron of a parish alive and vibrant in the hearts and imagination of the people is a significant way to evangelize. The permissions are given. Now, what about the ingenuity?

## SUGGESTIONS

The following is a list of ideas gleaned from my experiences. These examples are to serve as a catalyst for the imagination of those in parish leadership with a genuine interest in reclaiming the story of the saints or of the feast that gives the title to the parish.

**Publicize:** Create an online site for the saint. Let the website of the parish acclaim the story of the patron. If the parish has the title of a feast of the Church, such as The Presentation of



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The celebration of the octave of the patron feast, with special music, prayers, and outreach, gives the feast space and time for an appreciation of its depth and richness.

Mary, the website could share the story of the feast and its apocryphal origins. In either case, an icon or image of the patron could be displayed.

**Parish Mission:** Many parishes focus a three-night mission on the saint and his or her virtues and life story. This could be in the traditional pattern of a triduum, or three days of prayer, concluding on the night of the feast.

**Novena or Triduum:** Consider a nine-day or a three-day prayer time, either face-to-face or a virtual set of daily meditations that could be posted a day at a time or sent out to the parishioners via the parish email list. Such a novena could be hosted at the parish school, or with the religious classes in all the grades participating in preparation for the feast.

**Relics:** Many churches have a treasury of relics. These may be saved away or present in some form in the church building. Consider placing the relics of the saint in a substantial reliquary and enthroned for the feast and the veneration of the community. Catechesis about relics may be necessary. Brown's book would be a helpful resource for this.

**Processions:** Do not underestimate the power of a parade, a march, a movement of people with a purpose. We can learn a lot about sacred space and time from Hispanic Catholics, who celebrate this sacred kind of dance in the streets for the great festivals they keep. With the proper civil permits, these processions are an inspiring way to focus the attention of young people and older folks alike. This procession must include music and singing and the ringing of bells. It becomes a public witness and a prayer in motion for the intercession and patronage of the saint, whose statue and/or relic is brought to the street in solemn memory.

**Service Projects:** During the days of preparation for the parish feast day, charitable outreach could be planned in the name of the saint. On St. Anthony's feast, for instance, fresh bread is blessed and distributed to those in need. On St. Joseph's

Day, there is a custom of sharing a festive meal of fish for which participants make a monetary offering. The proceeds are donated to a charitable organization. Other creative projects inspired by the life of the patron saint would be a worthwhile way to celebrate the feast.

**Special Desserts:** *My Nameday: Come for Dessert*, by Helen McLoughlin (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1962) contains recipes that fit the stories of each saint that it highlights. Parishes can take up this idea, selecting an appropriate dessert to celebrate their patron and circulate it through the parish website and religious education classes. Families could be encouraged to share the dessert on the feast day, connecting with the whole community on the patronal feast day.

**The Octave:** In the Catholic tradition there is a custom of observing eight days of festival. In the liturgical calendars of old, the great feasts all had their octaves. The only two that now remain are the octaves of Easter and of Christmas. Why not take this tradition and reengage it for a parish community? Eight days of special music, lectures, prayers, outreach events, etc. could be scheduled. If sustaining the celebration for eight days is too much, perhaps two or three days would be welcome. The idea is to commemorate the patron and give this person depth in space and time and in the heart.

## CONCLUSION

I realize, and so must you, that this is not Schenectady, New York, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Though the past is gone, remaining within me and continuing to shape my life are the inspiration and hope of a heavenly patroness that touched my imagination with the promise of Christ.

May we take the lead of the past and continue to engage our heavenly patrons in a creative and contemporary way. To your imaginations, I commend these words. ♦

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REV. RICHARD N. FRAGOMENI, PHD, is a presbyter of the Diocese of Albany, New York. Since 1990, he has been a professor of liturgy and preaching at Catholic Theological Union. He also serves as rector of The Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii.

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