

Celebrating the Patronal Saint

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Catholics often identify themselves by the name of the parish to which they belong. To say “I worship at St. Catherine,” or “My church is St. Boniface,” expresses a connection not only to the parish community but to the patron saint for which the church is named.

According to the *Code of Canon Law* and the *Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, every church that is dedicated must have a title or a name. In some cases, the names are derived from a particular title associated with Jesus, such as Christ Our Savior or Christ the King. In other cases, churches may be named for the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit, or the Blessed Virgin Mary, but most are named for particular saints.

The practice of adopting the name of a saint can be traced back to the time of the Roman Empire, when church buildings were constructed over the graves of martyrs. The church was named for the martyr who was expected to intercede for all who worshipped there.

Other churches were named because of some connection to a saint who may have lived, preached, or died nearby, or whose relics were transferred there. As the number of Christian churches grew, it became common to name a church for the saint whose relics were housed there or whose name was associated with or venerated by the church’s founders.

Still today, the name of a new church is chosen by the clergy and the faithful. Churches named for days ranked as solemnities on the liturgical calendar, such as “Assumption,” “Annunciation,” and “St. Joseph” are celebrated as such by the universal Church. But according to the *Universal Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, the title of a particular church is also celebrated as a solemnity in that parish. That means that the Optional Memorial of St. Rose of Lima becomes a solemnity in parishes named St. Rose of Lima, and that the Feast of the Transfiguration can be marked as a solemnity in parishes named Transfiguration.

A parish may move its feast day to the closest Sunday in Ordinary Time. In this way, more people will be able to honor and celebrate their patron saint. The Lectionary readings from that saint’s feast day can be chosen along with the prayers designated for that saint in *The Roman Missal*.

Celebrating Mass is only one way to honor the patron saint of a parish. Consider offering activities related to the saint. For example, a church that is named after St. Ignatius might host a retreat on Ignatian spirituality. A church that is



Parishes may want to consider the patron saint’s charisms while deciding ways to celebrate the saint.

named after St. Francis of Assisi might plant and maintain a garden to accent his care for nature. Create ways to teach children about the saint; invite them to draw pictures of or write essays on the life of the saint. Fill the bulletin with fun facts, crossword puzzles, or word searches related to the saint.

These and other activities can help today’s parishioners better relate to someone who walked the earth long ago and inspire them to live like their patron saint as a prophetic witness to the love of God.