“Saint” literally means “holy one.” These holy ones, these silent partners, enjoy a new and perfected life in heaven, collectively lending their support to the church’s efforts to be faithful here on earth. The communion of saints does not scrounge up venture capital, of course, but their constant encouragement and ceaseless prayer on our behalf is worth far more. So long as there is a communion of saints, and Revelation promises that their heavenly witness is eternal, we will never lack in spiritual capital. These saints are our silent partners.

**Saints at Table.** The communion of saints sit at table with the Lord in the kingdom of heaven. They are the ones who taste, in Isaiah’s famous words, the storied feast on the mountain: “*of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear*.” The saints trust the power of the Lord to “*destroy…the shroud that is cast over all peoples*.” They know that on that glorious day God will “*swallow up death forever [and]…wipe away the tears from all faces*” (Isaiah 25:6-8). They stand in the presence of God, so they know this to be true; the assurance they enjoy gives hope to us all.

The author of Revelation glimpses this heavenly company in his vision. They gather around the throne of the Lamb, robed in white. They “*worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them*” (7:15). The joyful good news of the communion of saints is that *we are never alone.* Our feeble and faltering efforts to sing the Lord’s song are caught up in the unending hymn of the saints. The accumulated power of their faith washes over us like a huge wave and carries us along. Whenever we break bread together in the sacrament of the Lord’s supper, we share the feast of life with those who have gone before. We find ourselves, then, truly *in communion*, not merely with our fellow believers seated beside us, but with the faithful from every age.

**Saints Preserve Us.** In our common life in the church, and in our individual lives, we face many obstacles and carry on the best we can, striving to live out, in word and deed, this remarkable vocation called Christian discipleship. Sometimes things go well; we sense the Holy Spirit at work in our world, and realize we are surrounded by God’s love, constant as the air we breathe. We know, in bright moments like these, that this Christian faith of ours *works;* that it is the most eminently practical guide for living ever devised.

Of course, there are other times when we feel discouraged and disheartened. In such moments, life seems a weary round of one step forward, two steps back. There are times when we find ourselves nodding in sympathy with the psalmist's complaint that the wicked “*have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek…always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence*” (Psalm 73:4,12-13).

Yet, in every season, in good times or in bad, we can take comfort in the fact that we are never alone. For surrounding us on every side are those silent partners, the communion of saints. There is no struggle we confront in this life that a Christian disciple has not already faced and triumphed over. There is no sorrow or loss so deep that there are none who can share our pain. There is no moment when we are truly alone, not so long as we remain in communion with the company of the faithful from every time and place!

**Ordinary Saints.** So, who *are* these saints? Ordinary people, like us. Saints are not super-Christians with halos. They are not God’s all-star team. Saints are every disciple who, in Paul’s words, has “*fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith*” (2 Timothy 4:7). Look beyond the traditional artistic renderingsof saints, with their crowns, halos, and pious expressions, and you will discover that saints are very human. As Christian apologist Blaise Pascal points out, saints are merely people who have intimate knowledge of grace because they need it so much. “To make a person a saint,” Pascal writes, “grace is certainly needed, and anyone who doubts this does not know what a saint, or a human being, really is.”

Saints are people like Abraham, who did not become saintly until very late in life. Scripture tells us almost nothing about this patriarch’s life before age 75. Before he got the call to pull up stakes and move to the promised land, Abraham was probably buying and selling livestock, providing for his family, paying his servants, and carrying out his daily duties. Likely, he went for significant periods of time without any life-changing “mountaintop” experiences before God spoke to him. He was an average, ordinary guy like you or me.

Saints are people like Teresa of Avila who once walked out with a group of her fellow nuns, when it started pouring rain and the bridge collapsed, casting the entire company into the muddy waters. Teresa looked to the heavens and exclaimed, “God, if this is how you treat your friends, I’d hate to be your enemy!” We imagine Teresa shaking her fist at the heavens. Saints are ordinary people, who struggle with their faith like anyone else. The communion of saints is the community of the forgiven, not the supernaturally good.

**Saints Among Us.** Saints are some of the Christians we know and encounter day to day. Preacher Fred Craddock tells a story that brings home the power of this communion:

“It seems there was a young woman who learned she had a potentially fatal cancer. She had surgery, then some treatments. She was able to get on with her life for a time; but then, at a routine checkup, she learned the dreaded disease was back. There was more surgery and further treatment. This time it took more out of her. Recovery was slower. But she persevered and returned to her life again.

Some years later, during another routine checkup, she learned the disease had once again returned. This time, the prognosis was grim. She spent some time talking with her friends; she prayed; and she decided there would be no more surgery, no more grueling chemotherapy. The young woman went home. Her friends gathered around.

One day, Death came and knocked at the door. Her friends rushed to the door and leaned against it, to keep Death out. Death went away. A short time later, Death called again. The friends made as if to stand against it, but the young woman said no, move aside. They looked at her as though she were crazy. She couldn't possibly know what she was saying. They refused to obey. But she told them again, in a louder voice, to move away from the door. When they saw the steely determination in her eyes, they knew she meant what she said, so they moved away. Sensing no resistance, Death pushed open the door and came into the room. The young woman was sitting, propped up on pillows, waiting for Death, looking Death right in the eye.

When Death saw the strength of her spirit, Death looked beaten and ashamed. Death did take her, then — but Death knew that, by the power of Jesus Christ, and by the witness of the communion of saints gathered there in that room, there was no triumph to be had that day. Death had been beaten again.”

Believe in the communion of saints; it is one of the greatest supports for the Christian life, in this world as well as the next! As the writer of Hebrews puts it: “*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*” (12:1-3).

Prayer: Loving Father, thank You for the many people of faith who bear witness that Your Word is trustworthy and true. In the trials and difficulties of my life, help me to keep trusting You like this great cloud of witnesses. Help me to discard every encumbrance that may hinder my Christian progress and witness and give me perseverance as I press toward the final goal. May I patiently endure all the obstacles in life in the power of the Holy Spirit and help me to be a living witness to Your Word of truth. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

**Sources:**

* Blaise Pascal, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal’s Pensees Edited, Outlined, and Explained,* ed. Peter Kreeft (Ignatius Press, 1993), 164.
* Adapted from Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (Chalice Press, 2001), 38.

**Silent Partners**

Sunday, May 8, 2022 [Revelation 7:9-17](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+7%3a9-17&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Every famous inventor needs a combination of creativity, scientific aptitude, perseverance, the ability to “think outside the box,” and a healthy dose of self-confidence. To successfully make the jump from research and development to manufacturing, inventors also need money; lots and lots of money. Inventors who are not independently wealthy need investors. Inventors need the moxie to sell their dream to someone who believes in their dream and is willing to write big checks.

Samuel Colt, inventor of the revolver that bears his name, started out with money from his father who owned a textile plant. Colt formed a traveling medicine show to raise money and later a group of investors to fund his gun-manufacturing operation.

Samuel Morse was a teacher. A student’s wealthy father owned an iron works and was the first to bankroll Morse’s research. Later, Morse got substantial grants from the U.S. and U.K. governments to run the first transatlantic telegraph cable.

Alexander Graham Bell, also a teacher, schmoozed his pupils’ well-heeled dads for funds. A lawyer and a leather merchant happily funded Bell’s scheme for a new and improved communication system: the telephone.

Wilbur and Orville Wright funded their early research themselves using profits from their Dayton, OH bicycle shop. Once their first plane took off from Kitty Hawk, NC, the U.S. Army offered to buy a Wright airplane for $30,000.

**Silent Partners.** There is a phrase that describes this sort of investor: *a silent partner*. Forward-looking investors take on substantial risk because they believe in the inventor’s vision, industriousness, and personal integrity. Investors do not have what it takes to bring the dream to fruition; but they do have money and are willing to gamble it on a promising venture. Silent partners take a back seat so the inventor’s genius can flourish.

The Bible includes some silent partners, spiritually speaking, as mentioned in Revelation 7:9: “*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white*…” The Apostles’ Creed calls them “the communion of saints.” They stand with us, the present-day church, quietly lending support in ways of which we are only dimly aware.