

Faith Mennonite Church
November 3, 2013 - All Saints
Joetta Schlabach

The Wardrobe of Saints
Hebrews 11 & 12; Colossians 3:12-17

What do saints wear? Before we can answer that question we need to figure out just what it is that makes someone a saint. I'm glad that I'm living and preaching in 2013 when we aren't arguing to the point of death over the question of saints. Because our ancestors did just that. I spent a bit of time this week reading in the *Martyrs Mirror* (our Mennonite book of saints), which chronicles the history of Christian martyrdom from the early days of Christianity through the persecution of the Reformation period. As I read trial transcripts I was reminded that baptism and communion were not the only issues of disagreement that sent Anabaptists to their deaths in the 16th century. The understanding regarding saints was also hotly contested.

The Anabaptist renewal movement, birthed with the Reformation, was grounded in a deep commitment to scripture and to applying it to one's life. Indeed as I struggle to remember the details of things I read only yesterday I'm amazed at the breadth of the scriptures that Anabaptist Christians recited by memory as they responded to their accusers in the courts of Europe. They rejected many of the official church teachings and practices at the time for which they did not find direct support in the Bible. Because the letters of the New Testament addressed fellow Christians who were living and breathing as saints, Anabaptists rejected the notion that saints were those who had died and could play a role in mediating the salvation of the living, which was a common notion at the time. Anabaptists used the term "blessed" to refer to the dead, but they believed the call to sanctity, the call to live as saints, was the call for *every* Christian not just a few extra holy folks.

During much of the past 500 years, most Mennonites would have felt uncomfortable observing All Saints Day, which is taken from the Catholic and liturgical traditions. But for the past 50 years since the many changes that have unfolded in the Catholic Church due to the Second Vatican Council, there has been a sharing of gifts across Christian traditions and a re-appropriation of old practices with new interpretations. As Mennonite Christians we continue to invite and encourage one another in the daily walk of following Jesus, of imitating his ways, and we also recognize the strength that we can draw from the example of both ordinary and unusually gifted persons who have gone before us, who are part of what the writer of Hebrews termed the "great cloud of witnesses," and what the Catholic tradition refers to as the "communion of saints."

So back to the question: what do saints wear? We generally assume that they probably don't wear Prada. One of the most well-loved saints, whose name the current Pope took as his own—Francis, we will recall, was the son of a textile merchant, forerunner to the modern fashion industry. The story has it that, upon his spiritual conversion, Francis of Assisi, stripped naked and walked through the town as a way to communicate his renunciation of the life of textiles, of the privilege that he was expected to inherit. Francis, we are told, ever after dressed simply in the robes of a beggar as did the community that formed around him.

Today is the anniversary of the death of another person who is remembered as a saint: Juan Martin de Porres who was born in Lima, Peru in 1579. Martin was born to a woman of color, of African or Native American ethnicity, from Panama. His father, a Spanish nobleman,

refused to claim Martin or his sister, born several years later, as his legitimate children, so they grew up in poverty. Martin's mother worked as a laundry woman, and at a fairly young age, he was apprenticed to a barber—the surgeons of the time—and began learning the art of medicine. Martin had spiritual inclinations from a young age and spent much time in prayer as a child. At age 15 he sought to join the Dominican religious order but because they did not allow anyone of mixed race to enter as full members, he offered to join the community as a servant. While some of the leaders in the order recognized his gifts of charity and healing and tried to bend the rules so he could take “holy orders,” others in the monastery scorned him for his race and low social status.

Some reports suggest that Martin followed the tradition of wearing a hair-shirt--prickly and uncomfortable--as a form of self-discipline and mortification. But he is best remembered, and considered a saint in the Catholic Church, because of his acts of compassion and healing. He was known to bring sick beggars off the street and into his cell, giving up his own bed to care for them, much to the consternation of others in the monastery. Once when he was reprimanded, he replied, “Compassion, my dear brother, is more important than obedience [or cleanliness].”

As I read through the Martyrs Mirror, I did not find references to what the Anabaptist saints of the day were wearing, except for several references to people being stripped of their clothing to increase their humiliation as they were being punished. These saints were known not by the clothing they wore, but by what they did. Anna of Rotterdam, who was executed in 1539 wrote this in a letter to her son before her demise:

But where you hear of a poor, simple, cast-off little flock (Luke 12:32) which is despised and rejected by the world, join them; for where you hear of the cross, there is Christ; from there do not depart. ... Whatever you do, do it all to the praise of His name. Honor The Lord in the works of your hands, and let the light of the Gospel shine through you. Love your neighbor. Deal with an open, warm heart thy bread to the hungry, clothe the naked, and suffer not to have anything twofold; for there are always some who lack. (1950, 453).

The writer of the letter of Colossians used the image of clothing, of putting on, five characteristics that we might call the wardrobe of saints: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. This list of five positive attributes follows two earlier five-point lists of vices that the writer admonished the readers to take off. The first list names unhealthy personal lusts and desires and the second list describes behaviors that threaten community such as anger, slander and abusive language. When we enter the community of saints and accept the generous love of Jesus we take off the old clothing of the old ways that separated us from God and from others and we put on the new garment. We learn to forgive, to love and live at peace.

Like a work uniform these are things we put on every day. Doctors and nurses wear scrubs each time they enter the surgical theater. Traffic officers, firefighters, mail carriers, and chefs put on their uniforms every time they are on duty. We expect certain actions, certain expertise when we see a uniform or clothing associated with a particular profession.

Those who work and live with us should see our uniform of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Not because we're perfect but because we've been lovingly called to join in the communion of saints. And the history of the saints teaches us that we won't always be treated in kind; some may even hate us when we act with compassion on behalf of those who are at the bottom of society. But it is in this community, shaped by those who have gone before us, that we learn, and practice and find strength to live into this calling.