

All Saints Day (November 1), 2017
St. Mary's Church, Richmond VA (School Mass)
Fr. Michael Renninger

So, who is your favorite saint?

People often come up to me and ask, "Father, who is your favorite saint?"

Sometimes I tell them that it's Saint Augustine. He really knew how to sin when he was young, and he really knew how to love God when he was older.

Or I say that I love Saint Monica. She was Augustine's *mother*. She loved her son, and she never gave up on him, even though he broke her heart. Lots of modern moms know what that's like.

I love Saint Francis for his simplicity. I love Saint Mother Teresa for her service to the poor. I love Saint Nicholas for his generosity.

I love Saint Christina the Astonishing, who had a talent for floating into the rafters of the church (probably because the homily was bad)! I love Saint Patrick, who returned to Ireland to preach to the people who had earlier enslaved him.

Or Saint Elizabeth Seton. An American woman. A mom. Who converted to Catholicism and started an order of nuns to teach children.

But recently, I discovered my NEW favorite saint. And that saint is – *Saint Phocas of Sinope*.

(I know... he's one of your favorites, right?)

Saint Phocas of Sinope lived in the 4th century in town along the Black Sea, in modern day Turkey. There was a church in that town that people used to visit for special prayers. They would come from all over. Most of them walked.

Like most towns back then, Sinope had walls around it for protection. And sometimes, people who were walking toward the town to visit the church arrived after dark. The city gates had been closed up tight for the night, and the pilgrims had to sleep outside the walls, in the heat and the cold.

From an early age, Phocas had been taught to love Jesus. And he knew that every baptized believer is called to serve God. We are *all* called to be holy, to live our lives following the example of Jesus.

Back in the 4th century, when people talked about 'holiness,' about 'being saints,' they had a

number of examples to follow.

For instance, people back then thought that if you *really* wanted to be holy, you should leave your home, move out into the desert, and live a life of prayer and fasting. Many men and women had done that. It is how monasteries got started. So some people thought, ‘if I want to be holy, I have to do something *dramatic* – leave my home, and spend my life in the desert.’

Others thought that if you wanted to be a saint, if you wanted to be holy, you had to go to some far away country to preach about Jesus. And there were people who did that! They would travel to a strange place and tell people about Jesus. They usually never came home again. So if you wanted to be a saint, you had to go far away. Very dramatic.

Some people thought that the way to be a saint was to become a priest or a nun. Some people thought that the only way to be a saint was to be a martyr - to give your life for the faith.

Back in the 4th century, some people thought that if you wanted to be holy, you had to be a great teacher, a brilliant scholar, a fiery preacher, a worker of miracles.

Well, Phocas *wanted* to be a saint. He *wanted* to be holy. But he knew that he did not have the talent to be a great teacher, or a famous preacher, or a brilliant scholar. He knew that he could not travel far away to be a missionary. He knew he couldn’t survive in the desert.

Yet, when he prayed, he knew that Jesus was asking him to do something good with his life, with the talents that God had given him.

But the more he thought about it, Phocas discovered that he really only had one talent, one skill that God had given him. Phocas was really good at.... *growing vegetables*.

He knew how to take a seed, plant it in the ground, and take care of it, so that you end up with... *really delicious zucchini*.

His garden produced more food than anyone else’s in town.

So Phocas asked himself, “How can I be holy by growing zucchini and red beets?”

He knew that if he wanted to be holy, he had to figure how to use that gift God had given him in the way that God would want him to use it!

And that’s when Phocas remembered all of those people who walked to his town to visit the church, especially the ones who got stuck outside the gate, at night, in the cold.

So Phocas built a little house right outside the gate. He planted a garden. And he grew more food than he needed. He opened the doors of his little house to the pilgrims who needed a place to

stay. He fed them. And he fed the poor as well. He never asked for money. He just grew his vegetables, and fed people, and gave them a place to sleep.

When the emperor decided that he didn't like Christians, he sent troops to Sinope to kill Phocas. Well guess what – the troops arrived late. And where did they spend the night? At Phocas' house! Phocas knew that they had come to arrest him, but he fed them anyway, and gave the shelter. It was only the next morning that the troops realized that the man they had come to kill was the one who had been so kind to them.

He became a martyr, a saint, *not* for working miracles, but for growing string beans. He became a saint, not by go to a foreign land, but by planting seeds in his own land, doing the one thing God had made him good at.

You and I are called to be saints. You and I are called to be holy. Not tomorrow, but today. Not somewhere else, but right here.

Too often, we give ourselves an excuse NOT to be saints. We tell ourselves that, to be a saint, we have to do something dramatic, unusual, spectacular. We often do that in order to say, “Well, since I can't work miracles or move to another continent, I guess that means I can't be a saint.”

Well, if you ever think that way, I want to you remember my new favorite saint. Saint Phocas. He understood that the whole point of the Christian life is to discover the gifts that God gave you, the abilities that God created in you... and then, use them the way God wants you to.

God gave Mr. Lenich the ability to play the piano – he is becoming a saint by playing music for God.

God gave Chef Gene the ability to cook – he is becoming a saint by making meals for hungry students.

God gave your teachers the ability to add and spell and speak different languages – they are becoming saints by using those skills to teach you how to do those same things.

And God gave a guy named Phocas the ability to grow vegetables. He became a saint by feeding the hungry, and being kind to strangers.

A thousand years from now, on All Saints Day, perhaps some preacher will tell the story of the “Great Saints of Short Pump.” But that will only happen if we pay attention to the gifts that God gave us, and start – today – to ask Jesus: how can I use this gift to be a saint?