

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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The Feast of All Saints

Last year's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel is titled, *All the Light We Cannot See*, by Anthony Doerr. It is set in Europe during the Second World War, and it unfolds the lives of two adolescent characters, an orphan boy in Germany named Werner who is destined for service in the Nazi military machine, and a blind girl in Paris named Marie-Laure. They are destined by the war to discover one another for a fleeting moment of compassion and grace, but it comes amid a great deal of hardness and sadness and loss. Marie-Laure was blinded when she was a small child by a degenerative disease, and by the time she is 12 years old she sees nothing at all. Her mother is deceased and she lives as the only child of her father, who loves her dearly and cares for her selflessly. The father is a curator in a museum by profession, but he is an expert woodworker by avocation. Eventually they are driven into exile by the German invasion of Paris, and after a terrible journey they find refuge in a small, walled medieval port city on the coast of France called Saint-Malo. It is a place that is utterly foreign to Marie-Laure, a jumbled maze of streets and paths and staircases and paved little plazas. It seems a hopeless task for her to find any way around. And so as a gift of love her father labors for weeks at his woodcutting table and eventually produces an intricate small-scale replica of the whole town so that Marie-Laure can run her fingers across the buildings and roads and markets and learn how to know just where is their home in relation to every other place, and how she can move about on her own. She is too afraid to go outside by herself, and so for many weeks her father takes her by the arm and guides her around all of the crooks and corners of the town. They count the number of steps that it takes to move from one street to another, and discover where to turn left or right to get to the bread shop or the vegetable market. They learn to recognize the sounds of certain bells, and the ocean tides, and the various animals around.

Eventually the father is captured by Nazi intelligence officers and taken away. He's never heard from again. And now Marie-Laure is alone in a city that is occupied by the Germans, and there she is in danger because she is suspected of harboring secrets that her father may have shared with her, or treasures that he may have entrusted to her. In fact, although she doesn't even know it, her father *had* hidden a priceless gemstone inside that little miniature model, but in the end it was the replica of the city that her father made, together with all of his patient, loving practice and teaching together, that spared Marie-Laure's life. She had discovered how to flee for safety, and for a moment in time, she was given help by a young Nazi communications specialist named Werner, who barely knew her but who had the heart of compassion for a vulnerable girl.

This is the anatomy of saints. This is what they look like; this is how they come to be, and this is how they behave. Whether it be like Marie-Laure's father, patiently introducing a beloved daughter to a world that she could not see, preparing her for the day he knew he would no longer be there to help her. Or whether it be like young Werner—all dressed up in a uniform of hatred but responding with mercy in an instant when he was made to choose between evil and virtue. These are not the remote, porcelain, eccentric, rare personalities that we sometimes automatically think of when we are invited to reflect on the lives of saints. Not ancient Popes and medieval monks and ascetical nuns and missionary martyrs from exotic places. Those saints are important too. But they aren't the ones that we're ever likely to meet or be asked to imitate in our own circumstances. *These* saints, rather, are the ones who live real life on Planet Earth, often in the midst of chaos and messiness and hardship—sometimes of their own making, rarely by their own choosing. Saints who most people don't recognize by name and who don't make themselves conspicuous because of overt acts of heroism in public. They aren't even perfect in their moral behavior, because, actually, who of us can *ever* be? These saints are the ones like our own beloved parishioners whom we called out individually at the beginning of this liturgy. They

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are very near to us and even seem unexceptional to us. And they reveal to us, whether for and instant or over the course of many decades, all the light we cannot see. They are the saints in truth, because to do that is exactly to emulate the Master, Jesus.

That's what he was doing up on that Mountain of the Beatitudes in Galilee when the crowd gathered around and he began to teach. He told them about all the things that they could not yet see with merely human eyes and senses. Things that are true and already exist even here in this world but which only the light of faith can disclose to us—and sometimes even then only for a fleeting moment.

Marie-Laure's father told her about the world where they were living in Saint-Malo, France. He allowed her to literally feel it, and then he walked her all around it so that she would learn to trust it, even when that seemed like a scary and risky thing to do. It was all real. They were living in the midst of it every day. And even more than that, there was *treasure* in the midst of it all, more than Marie-Laure had any idea about—a priceless gem inside the wooden model, and a virtuous young Nazi at the city gate whom she'd never met. There were saints in the midst of World War II.

And Jesus told his audience about a place where saints dwell also. And it wasn't heaven. It was then and there on the mountain. He spoke about those who were truly blessed by God, the truly holy witnesses, the saints. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." These people aren't to be found in heaven. They are here. "Blessed are those who mourn." Mourning is what *Earth* people do, not angels, not the resurrected ones. "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Well, he's talking about *us*! *We* are the saints? That is a conviction that demands the light of faith to see. *We* are already immersed in the unfathomable treasure that is God's Kingdom? Now? Yes, there is light that we cannot see. Not yet. And it is all the saints among us who give us glimpses of it, by being peacemakers (How blessed they are!), by showing mercy (Blessed are they!), by being persecuted for the sake of righteousness (Rejoice and be glad!). These are the people whom I already know. They live among us. They worship at St. Pascal's. Many of them have died, but that is not when and why they became saints. We must not wait until then, either.