Set Apart by God

When I was confirmed in the Roman Catholic church as a young teen, it was the tradition to adopt the name of a saint. I chose Elizabeth.

I think that I chose the name because it was the same name as my aunt, and not because I had any special connection or attraction to Saint Elizabeth. I probably read enough to be able to answer a question in Sunday school class about who my saint was, why they were a saint. If you get the sense that I was not terribly engaged with Sunday school and confirmation class, you are probably right.

There are several Saint Elizabeths. The most commonly known is St Elizabeth of Hungary, or Elizabeth of Thuringia. She was married at age 14, and widowed at age 20. After her husband's death, she regained her dowry, and used the money to build a hospital where she herself served the sick. She became a symbol of Christian charity after her death in 1231 at the age of 24. She is the patron of bakers, beggars, brides, charities, and death of children.

The other well-known St Elizabeth is the biblical mother of John the Baptist, and relative of Mary the mother of Jesus. She was past normal child-bearing age when she conceived and gave birth to John.

If you ask the Roman Catholic church how many saints there are, they will tell you they do not know as there is no single register. The best estimates are that there are over 10,000.

Some of the most familiar names:

Among men are: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, George, Andrew, Patrick, Valentine, and Columba.

Among women we know: Mary, Elizabeth, Catherine, Joan, Anne, Clare, Agatha, Hildegard, Kateri and Teresa.

I am sure that you can names some others.

The most common reasons why these people have been identified and named as saints are that:

they had exceptional holiness or closeness to God,
they led particularly heroic or virtuous lives,
they offered their life for others, or
they were martyred for their faith.

Whatever the reason, they are the heroes and heroines of our faith. The stories of their actions and their lives are a source of encouragement, inspiration and strength for us.

They have gone before us and they show us the way, the way of faith in Jesus.

To be sure, some of their stories are fanciful. I am not sure if George actually slayed a dragon the way we see it portrayed in some paintings and images – a knight on horseback plunging a spear or sword into fearsome, fire-breathing dragon. Some, probably most, of the saints were not models for us throughout all of their lives; Saint Paul, the author of many of the letters in the Bible, was a persecutor of the followers of “The Way,” the early followers of Jesus before he had a vision and eventually become one of the most prolific writers of the time and leaders of the emerging faith.

However, these saints, as fanciful and imperfect as they may be, are the signposts on the trail of our life, on our journey of faith.

We write books, create art and make movies about them and we dedicate important buildings in their name.

While 10,000 identified saints sounds like a lot, there is another group of saints that is much, much bigger. In actual fact it is a group that numbers into the billions. It is the group of saints that includes you and me. Yes, we are all saints. You and me!

As the bible describes it, we are all saints, everyone of us, as we are all created by God to do good works. We are set apart to be a witness in our own areas, living lives that reflect God, albeit imperfectly.

Paul, Saint Paul, in his letters addresses the ordinary Christians in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus and Philippi as saints.

In our baptism, we have each been set apart for a special purpose, and the Holy Spirit has been sent to dwell within us.

The challenge that has been set before us is to continue to grow as a saint.

The 10,000 or so individuals that we have given the title saint were not recognized until after their deaths. Paul's letters clearly calls the entire congregations of the living as saints, because God has set them apart in Christ. Or as the First Letter of John says, "that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." (v1)

The Revelation to John reminds us that the multitude of saints is so large that it cannot be counted, and the saints come "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." (v1) They all stand before the throne of God with palm branches in their hands.

They are assured that "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat" (v16) and the Lamb "will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (v17)

As much as we are in the community of all the saints, we are also in communion with all of God's creation.

This is part of the challenge set before us as we continue to grow as saints. The challenge that we do not exalt ourselves above the other creatures in God's creation, but worship along side them, so that we join the choir of all creation singing the praises of God.

We are not the absolute owners of the earth, but creatures who depend on an intricate web of life.

We are all created by God to do good works. We are set apart to live lives that reflect God, albeit imperfectly alongside all of creation.

Thanks be to God for God's call to be a saint. Amen.

Readings: Matthew 5:1-12
Rev 7:9-17
Ps 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3