

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
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## Thanksgiving

### I. St. Cecilia

When I asked to be directed to the lives of the saints, I frightened the reference librarian. She scurried away from me and returned with three books; my favorite is called *Saints Preserve Us!*, subtitled *Everything You Need to Know About Every Saint You'll Ever Need*. Yes, indeed, a Holy Host of Heavenly Helpers is at hand! It will come as no surprise to many of you that, whatever our problem, we have at our disposal the Papally Prescribed Perpetual Personal Protection of a Plethora of Powerful Patrons in Paradise. In their opening sentence, authors Sean Kelly and Rosemary Rogers assure us that we don't have to be Catholic or even Christian to have patron saints. They are, they say, "like enzymes, gravity, [and] the CIA, invisible ... but eternally present, and hard at work on [our] behalf, whether or not [we] know it or like it."<sup>1</sup> It's all news to me, and I'm still shaking my head in wonder.

Today, we are honored guests at a Thanksgiving feast of George Frideric

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<sup>1</sup> Alliterations and quote are from Sean Kelly and Rosemary Rogers. *Saints Preserve Us!*, p. v

Handel's

*Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, which premiered in London two hundred and seventy years ago today, the feast day of St. Cecilia. The central theme of the text, a poem by English poet John Dryden, is the Pythagorean theory of *harmonia mundi*, which says that music was a primal force in the creation of the earth.<sup>2</sup>

Benjamin Britten, whose ninety-sixth birthday would have been today, also composed a spectacular setting of poet W.H. Auden's *Hymn to Saint Cecilia*. Here is Auden's invocation; let's diverge from our all-Handel service for just one minute, to hear those four exquisite lines:

Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions  
To all musicians, appear and inspire:  
Translated Daughter, come down and startle  
Composing mortals with immortal fire.<sup>3</sup>

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St. Cecilia, matron saint of music and musicians, inspired giants. Who was she?

I hate to tell you this, but this saint thing is not all it's cracked up to be. I came away from the gory details of the lives of the saints feeling a little green around the gills, and Cecilia's story is no exception.

If you ever read *Canterbury Tales*, you'll remember *The Second Nun's*

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ode\\_for\\_St.\\_Cecilia%27s\\_Day\\_%28Handel%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ode_for_St._Cecilia%27s_Day_%28Handel%29)

<sup>3</sup> W.H. Auden, invocation to *Hymn to St. Cecilia*

*Tale*; that was Chaucer's rendering of the life and death of Cecilia. We are told that the telling of that story occupied pilgrims for five miles of their journey. But you'll want to know that Cecilia was a real person, a young woman of a patrician family who lived in Sicily under Emperor Marcus Aurelius, martyred for her devotion to Christ in roughly year 176 of the common era. She [was reputed to be so close to heaven that she could hear the singing of angels,<sup>4</sup> and] played the organ,<sup>5</sup> which, in some stories, she is said to have invented ... but I don't think so.

So-called highlights of her brief and tragic life that I can bring myself to repeat are that, on her wedding night, “full of despair,” she asked G\*d to help her in her hour of need. When the ceremony ended, at the dreaded hour, Cecilia “confessed to her [new] husband, Valerian, that she had consecrated her virginity to G\*d.”<sup>6</sup> Believe it or not – there's a lot of suspension of disbelief in all of these saint stories – she convinced Valerian to convert to Christianity and allow her to remain a virgin. Very nice guy, her husband, who was later caught and imprisoned for burying the bodies of martyred Christians<sup>7</sup> and beheaded for refusing to bow to Jupiter.<sup>8</sup>

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4 John W. Ehrlich, Music Director, The Spectrum Singers, from liner notes for the performance of *Hymn to St. Cecilia* at Church of the Advent in Boston, 5/20/00. Please see [www.spectrumsingers.org/archives/1999-00/may00\\_notes.html](http://www.spectrumsingers.org/archives/1999-00/may00_notes.html)

5 Kelly and Rogers, *op cit*, p. 57

6 *ibid*

7 John J. Delaney, *Pocket Dictionary of Saints*, p. 112

8 Everything that isn't from Kelly and Rogers is from Master Mark Johnson of The Academy of St. Cecilia. *Some Thoughts on St. Cecilia*. Please see [www.academyofsaintcecilia.com/vox/stcecilia.htm](http://www.academyofsaintcecilia.com/vox/stcecilia.htm)

Then Cecilia was arrested, in turn, for burying her husband and his friends.<sup>9</sup> And then ... well, I'm going to skip that part ... let's just say that, despite the efforts of her murderers, she just wouldn't die. Mortally wounded, she lay around for three days with her head severed, making the sign of the Trinity with her fingers.<sup>10</sup>

When it came time to found the Academy of Music in Rome in 1584 – here's a leap of imagination – Cecilia came to mind, and was chosen as its patron [or matron] saint.<sup>11</sup> Breathing a grateful sigh of relief that so terrible a story could come to so glorious end as to inspire the feast that Mark Buckles, the Arlington Street Choir, the Longwood Symphony Orchestra, and all our musicians have prepared for us today, let us now be filled and celebrate.

## II. Beauty

How do we care for our souls? How do we strengthen and deepen our spiritual lives?

My answer to that question begins with the very first hours of each new week: Sunday morning – being here, with you – is a gift to my soul. Being in beloved and generous spiritual community: exalted music and inspiring and comforting, encouraging and challenging words are all aspects of our worship

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<sup>9</sup> Delaney, *op cit*, p. 112

<sup>10</sup> Kelly and Rogers, *op cit*, p. 58

<sup>11</sup> Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Saints: from Mary and St. Francis of Assisi to John XXIII and Mother Teresa*, p. 472

that nourish our souls. Today, as a gift for Thanksgiving and in thanksgiving, we are immersed in a feast of beauty. The soul needs beauty.

Thirteenth century Persian poet Muslih-un-Din Sa'di wrote,  
 If of thy mortal goods thou art bereft,  
 And from thy slender store two loaves alone to thee are left,  
 Sell one, and with the dole  
 Buy hyacinths to feed thy soul.<sup>12</sup>

Vernacular translation from the translation: If you're so broke you're down to your last two loaves of bread, keep one to eat, sell the other, take the money, and buy beautiful flowers to feed your soul.

We care for our souls with beauty.

Your ministers had the great good fortune to spend part of last week at a convocation in Ottawa, Ontario, in the company of four hundred of our colleagues and Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul*. These are Tom's words:

The “assumption that beauty is an accessory, and dispensable, shows that [our society doesn't yet] understand the importance of giving the soul what it needs. The soul is nurtured by beauty. What food is to the body, arresting, complex, and pleasing images are to the soul.... [If] we lack beauty in our lives,

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<sup>12</sup> Moslih-un-Din Sa'di (1184-1291), *Gulistan (Garden of Roses)*

we will probably suffer ... depression, paranoia, meaninglessness, and addiction. The soul craves beauty, and in its absence, suffers ... 'beauty neurosis.'<sup>13</sup>

Poet Robert Bridges wrote:

My eyes for beauty pine,  
My soul for [G\*d's] grace....

“Beauty assists the soul in its own peculiar ways of being,” Tom Moore continues. “For example, beauty is arresting. For the soul, it is important to be taken out of the rush of practical life for the contemplation of timeless and eternal realities. Tradition named this need of the soul *vacatio* – a vacation from ordinary activity in favor of a moment of reflection and wonder. [Beauty has an arresting power,].... and giving in to that sudden longing of the soul is a way of giving it what it needs. Discussions of beauty can sometimes sound ethereal and philosophical, but from the soul viewpoint, beauty is a necessary part of ordinary life. Every day, we will find moments when the soul glimpses an occasion for beauty.”<sup>14</sup>

“Sōetsu Yanagi, founder of Japan's modern craft movement, defines beauty as that which gives unlimited scope to the imagination.”<sup>15</sup> The soul's instrument is neither the mind nor the body, but imagination.<sup>16</sup> “Beauty is a

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*, pp. 277-280

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Moore, *op cit*, pp. 277-280

<sup>16</sup> Marsilio Ficino (15<sup>th</sup> century), as cited in Moore, *op cit*, pp. xi-xiv

source of imagination, he says, that never dries up.”

Tom Moore concludes, “If we are going to care for the soul, and if we know that the soul is nurtured by beauty, then we will have to understand beauty more deeply and give it a more prominent place in life.... An appreciation for beauty is simply an openness to the power of things to stir the soul. If we can be affected by beauty, then soul is alive and well in us, because the soul's great talent is for being affected. The word *passion* means basically 'to be affected,' and passion is the essential energy of the soul.”<sup>17</sup>

Robert Bridges' poem concludes,

And every gentle heart,  
That burns with true desire,  
Is lit from eyes that mirror part  
Of that celestial fire.<sup>18</sup>

And now,

Blessed Cecilia,  
appear and inspire:  
come down and startle us  
with immortal fire!<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Moore, *op cit*, pp. 277-280

<sup>18</sup> Robert Seymour Bridges (1844-1930), no title, from *The Shorter Poems of Robert Bridges* (published 1890)

<sup>19</sup> Riffing on Auden, *op cit*

Let us give thanks for this feast of beauty for our souls.