

We've tended to conflate All Saints OSB and All Souls OSB, in recent years, partly because we've already celebrated them, in a sense, within the feasts of All Saints and All Souls of last week and partly because we recognise, now, that it's not so easy to tease out who is a saint and who is not and that goes as much for the living as for the dead, and partly also, perhaps, because the early church referred at one stage to all its members as 'saints'. We are easily deceived and also prone to idealise. Recent scandals in the Church have made this, perhaps, less possible for now but as nuns and monks become scarcer you can bet the process will return – think of the idealisation of native Americans or indigenous peoples everywhere once they are no longer a threat. Even now, the title 'Abbey' or 'Monastery' carries a certain cachet and, in an increasingly unstable world, people look to the idea of monks and nuns living in community as an example of what could be possible for all if only everyone else could be as holy. The reality, of course, from inside the story of monastic living, is quite different. We need spiritual potty training as much as any one else. So the conflation of All Saints and All Souls is, perhaps, not such a bad idea as long as we hold out the hope that sanctity is still possible even for us. And so we remember all those saints, both of long ago and more recently; even members of this community who have influenced us for the better rather than the worse and ponder, perhaps, how they did it. I have in mind the well-known concept of positive and negative reinforcement and feedback in psychoanalytic theory which holds that certain traits within us, inherited or learned, can become a permanent part of our nature through the practised response or attention of others. Or, in the words of François Mauriac,

We are moulded and remoulded by those who have loved us , and though the love may pass, we are nevertheless their work, for good or ill.

So we give thanks to all those who, in a positive sense, have been part of us, and we give thanks to God that it's God's 'positive unconditional regard' for all of us that makes this process possible – and is, indeed, what the process is all about.

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