

One of the great differences between Christian saints and the wise spiritual heroes of other religions is that Christian saints learn to be close to God as they constantly go out of their way to serve their neighbors.

One surprising example is the case of St. Almachius who lived in Palestine around the year 400. From an early age he felt called to love God wholeheartedly by following a life of prayer and penance. So, for many years he lived as a hermit in the desert wastelands, doing just that. Eventually, however, the Holy Spirit entrusted him with a surprising mission to his neighbors. Even though Christianity by this time was the Roman Empire's official religion, the infamous and very pagan gladiatorial combats were still regularly held in the Roman coliseum.

The Romans loved those "sporting events," which inevitably resulted in unjust, bloody, and cruel deaths for valiant men. Many gladiators were prisoners or slaves being forced to entertain the crowds by their gruesome combat, as if they were no better than savage beasts. It was a frontal assault against the human dignity of these men who had been created in God's image and redeemed by Christ.

Driven by the Holy Spirit, Almachius made his way to Rome when one such event was in full swing. He entered the amphitheatre, climbed down to the arena floor, and interposed himself between the primary combatants, who were engaged in their death struggle. This scrawny hermit did his best to separate them, invoking the name of the Lord. The fans, thirsty for blood, were furious. They hurled every manner of projectile at the unprotected monk, stoning him to death. Fortunately, the Emperor heard about the affair and took it as a sign from God. From then on, such beastly games were forbidden; Christian love had been victorious.

There's no doubt that in today's world, people are very busy. Sometimes we even feel much too busy to take time to reach out to neighbors in need. But there's a secret weapon we all can use...even in our super-busyness. We can pray for other people. When we pray for people we are exercising both loves at the same time: we show our love for God by talking to Him and expressing confidence in His goodness and power, and we show our love for our neighbor by caring about them. Each one of us should have a list of people we pray for regularly - family members, coworkers, orphans, politicians, Christians suffering persecution... And we should keep the list somewhere that we will have a chance to use it - near the windshield of the car or the counter where we fold the laundry... (The pope keeps his on his kneeler, where he does his morning and evening prayers). You see, to pray regularly and sincerely for others – well, that's the secret weapon for loving God and loving our neighbor. During this Mass, let's promise to use that weapon well.