

Feast of All Saints November 01, 2016

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14, 1 John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12a

The feast of All Saints refers to all those baptized Christians who have died and are now with God in glory. It also certainly includes all human persons who lived a good life sincerely in accordance with the convictions of their conscience. This feast is celebrated on the first of November in the West, since 837 when Pope Gregory IV ordered its church-wide observance. All Saints' Day has been observed by the Church as an occasion to celebrate in a special way all its saints, past and present, whatever be their country of origin, race, or denomination, and whether they are known to us personally or not. On this day we remember the saints, who may have been forgotten, or never been specifically honored. But they are holy persons whose examples we aim to imitate and their life we admire and at the same time ask for their prayers and intercessions. The All Saints Day is tied in with the concept of the Communion of Saints. This is the belief that all of God's people, on heaven, earth, and in the state of purification, are connected in a communion. We celebrate the lives of ordinary men and women of every time and place who lived in an extraordinary way in fidelity to the message of the gospel. These men and women have been teachers and preachers of the Gospel. They have been founders of religious orders, persons manifesting zeal for Christ. They have been married persons, missionaries, and martyrs who have sacrificed their lives. They have been royal persons, scholars, mystics or ordinary simple individuals. They come from all walks of life and from various parts of the globe. But all these belong to the mystical body of Christ and are ours. They show us through their lives how to live faithfully the Beatitudes of Jesus. In the history of the Church there have been countless others who really are saints, quiet and simple and who are now with God in heaven. Their names may not be in the list of canonized saints of the church but are especially remembered today on this feast day. These saintly men and women whom we remember are blessed and holy and we ought to follow in their footsteps.

Today when we celebrate the solemnity of All Saints and look at the shining example of these Saints it leads us to reawaken within us the great longing to be like them, to live near God in happiness, to remain in his divine light and to live fully in the great family of God's friends. Being a Saint means living close to God, to live in his family. Indeed this is the vocation of us all, vigorously reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council and solemnly proposed today for our attention. The Saints' biographies describe men and women who, docile to the divine plan, sometimes faced unspeakable trials and suffering, persecution and martyrdom. Our Lord teaches us that to be a Saint requires neither extraordinary actions or works

nor the possession of exceptional gifts. He wants each one of us to live a simple life faithful to the Father. It means that it is necessary to listen to Jesus and then to follow him without losing heart when faced by difficulties. "If anyone serves me", he warns us, "he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him". It is a call for us to be united with Jesus as he tells us in the Gospel of John to be like the grain of wheat buried in the earth; those who trust him and love him sincerely accept dying to themselves. Indeed, he knows that whoever seeks to keep his life for himself loses it, and whoever gives himself, loses himself, and in this very way finds life. Thus Jesus tells us that our life should be like his, a sacrificial life, given in the service of others. The example of the Saints encourages us to follow in their same footsteps and to experience the joy of those who trust in God, for the one true cause of sorrow and unhappiness for men and women is to live far from him.

The origin of this feast lies in the common commemorations of martyrs who died in groups or whose names were unknown, which were held on various days in different parts of the Church. However, over time these celebrations came to include not only the martyrs but all saints, those persons who lived a holy life faithful to the Gospel. The purpose of the feast is said to be twofold. As the prayer of the Mass states, "the merits of all the saints are venerated in common by this one celebration," because a very large number of martyrs and other saints could not be given special honor since the days of the year would not be sufficient for individual celebrations. The second purpose was given by Pope Urban IV that if there has been any negligence, omission, and irreverence committed in the celebration of the saints feasts throughout the year is to be atoned and due honor is offered to them. This celebration of the feast of all saints reminds us of the fact that they are present, interceding on our behalf as we are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and are a great role model for us. In the New Testament, sainthood is a status which church members enjoyed because of their consecration to God through Christ's saving work, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Later the term was applied to people who, by their character, life, and conduct, showed outstanding expression of their consecration to God and outstanding way of living their life dedicated to God. The names of saints began to be included in the liturgical calendars only in the second century.

The First Reading from the book of Revelation presents an apocalyptic vision of those who have died in Christ. Here John describes two visions which he had of the elect on earth and of the countless numbers of martyrs in heaven. The chosen ones of God on earth are the new Israel the successors of the twelve tribes. They represent every nation, tribe and language and now stand before God and give thanks to him for the gift of salvation. Those 'marked with the seal' on earth, those

identified as Christian, appear to be protected by God in the midst of great turbulence. The second vision is of Heaven, with particular emphasis on those wearing white robes, those who 'have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb'. These are men and women who have become one with Christ in their earthly lives and have been transformed by remaining firm in 'the time of great distresses. They now stand around the throne of God and the Lamb and they are the people who remained loyal to God through their suffering and hardship. They sing the praises of God and his son who has brought them to salvation. Their white robe and palm in hand testify victory. All the inhabitants of heaven adore worship and praise God.

In the second reading, the Apostle John wrote to the churches of Asia Minor to encourage them to remain faithful to Christ who is the Son of God. He tells them as he tells us that God has made us his children and if we live as true children we shall see him in heaven as he is face to face. He reminds the converts of the amount of love the Father has poured out to each one individually, that they should be called children of God; and indeed all those of us who are called are his children. Here John stresses again of the great love of God who has chosen to call us His children. During our sanctification through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ. "What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." John tells us of the great love of God who has chosen to call us His children and now enables us to be his saints. It only remains for God to finish the transformation by revealing himself totally to us in eternal glory. When he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. Therefore every Christian must strive to remain pure free of all sins.

The Gospel chosen for today's feast gives us the Eight Beatitudes which form the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. It is in fact a charter for holiness. When many people think of holiness they think of keeping the Ten Commandments and having external observances of charity, fasting, service, almsgiving and prayer. They are still valid but Jesus gives us the novel version of the commands in the Beatitudes. Jesus proclaims that those believers who are currently in dire situations will ultimately share in the blessedness of God. In this Gospel passage Matthew portrays Jesus as he begins his Sermon on the Mount with a series of nine Beatitudes. In a religious context beatitude is a statement in the indicative mood beginning with a form of the adjective Blessed, declaring certain people to be in a privileged, fortunate circumstance. As a form of speech Beatitudes are found in the OT wisdom literature and prophesy. The beatitudes of Jesus are the prophetic pronouncements aimed at those who are presently in dire circumstances but who will be vindicated at the final coming of God's Kingdom. All of the beatitudes

express a conviction that those who believe in and are committed to the coming and already present Kingdom of God will experience a radical transformation that can only be captured by the word blessed. The confidence behind this faith in radical change is based on the authority of the one making the proclamation: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Therefore, believers are not those who expect instant gratification as the immediate result of faith. They are the committed followers of Jesus who can fully grasp the present circumstance with an eschatological conviction of the future fulfillment of the Kingdom. These beatitudes are Our Lord's clear and paradoxical teaching on the right dispositions towards this life, for any person who aspires to attain the Kingdom of Heaven. They refer to signs and dispositions we would probably consider unfortunate, but that, from a Christian perspective, are reassuring.

Each of the Beatitude starts with the word 'blessed' which is sometimes translated 'happy'. It is more accurate to translate it as 'fortunate' or in other words, people who have these qualities are persons who belong to the 'kingdom of heaven'. These describe a situation or describe the kind of society that exists when we live according to these values, namely a place of truth and love, of compassion and justice, of peace, freedom and sharing, qualities which emanate from God himself. Blessed are those who are poor in spirit. They are those who are aware of their basic poverty and in need the help and support of God. They are told to be spiritually detached from goods and possessions and place their trust in the divine. Blessed are those who are gentle who reach out to others in care and compassion and tenderness. There are those blessed who mourn or those in grief or sorrow who will be assured of comfort from the loving community in Christ. Those who hunger and thirst for what is right and work for it and they will be given what are their due to live a life of dignity and self-respect. Those who are merciful will have compassion and forgiveness all around them. Blessed are those pure in heart and they will be able to see God. The peace makers are blessed as they are the ones who will be called the children of God. Finally those who are persecuted in the cause of right are blessed and will rejoice because reward is great in heaven. There is an implicit contrast between the various kingdoms of the earth and the ultimate Kingdom of God. The power of ultimate transformation belongs only to the kingdom of God in spite of how things may appear. This is the vision Jesus wanted to proclaim to his disciples and to the Church. Contrary to what might be seen, those who have the faith and courage to follow Jesus are blessed both now and in the age to come.

On this feast of All Saints when we think about holiness, many of us tend to think that only extraordinary people are holy people. Perhaps that's a way of defending against the idea that God asking us to be holy too. Or we think that the holy people

are those special ones in monasteries and convents, gliding silently around in cloistered gardens while reading their prayer books, with little birds fluttering around St. Francis of Assisi and the like. That however, is not the way God sees it. The Book of Revelations tells us that a large number, innumerable, all of them clothed in the white robes manifesting sanctity and victory. The church teaches us that God's call for holiness is universal. Everyone is called to live in God's love and make His love real in the lives of those around them. The Beatitudes show us the spiritual features of Jesus and thus express his mystery, the mystery of his death and Resurrection, of his passion and of the joy of his Resurrection. This mystery, which is the mystery of true blessedness, invites us to follow Jesus and thus to walk toward it.

Today's feast is first of all an occasion for great thanksgiving. Ultimately, it is our feast since all of us are called to be saints. It is altogether reasonable to think that many of our family, relatives and friends who have gone before us are being celebrated today. We will be with our parents, our grandparents, as well as those members of our families who sacrificed their own comfort and resources in order that we might have our Catholic Faith. They are the nuns and teachers who taught us about Jesus Christ, about the Sacraments and the life of God we receive in Mass and Holy Communion. They are our friends who supported us in our choices to do what is decent, what is good, what is pure, and what is noble and best. They are priests who inspired us, prayed for us, and prayed with us. They are people who lived down the street and dropped everything to come and help us, and to care for us when we were sick, or when we were in trouble. We look forward to the day when we, too, can be with them experiencing the same total happiness with Jesus and Mary in heaven. When we celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice we are closely united with the saints in heaven through the worship of God done in the Church.

One day when the little child was refusing to eat her cereals and milk before going to school, her mother complained to her husband. The Father of the child tried coaxing her to eat and said he would give whatever she asks if she eats. The child accepted to eat but said that afterwards he should not say no. The father agreed. The child ate it all struggling through but finished her meal. Then he asked Dolly what exactly was the thing she wanted. She replied Daddy I want to shave my head this weekend. The Father was taken aback and tried to convince her but the child was adamant. The mother too tried to convince the six year old with no success. Finally they allowed her to do it and the child came home on Saturday smiling and happy while the parents were embarrassed. On Monday the father went to drop her to school and she asked him to wait till he met her friend. Soon a car stopped and out came a little boy who came running to her with no hair on the head. The father was shocked. Then Dolly explained to her father that her friend had cancer and the

treatment made him lose his hair. He was shy and so she and two of her friends decided to shave their heads to keep him company. There were tears in the eyes of all parents there of the sacrifice made by little children to help their friend. A little saint.

Fr Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India