

God wants us to be saints

The Solemnity of All Saints – Sunday, November 1, 2020

Readings: Rev 7:2-4, 9-14; 1 Jn 3:1-3; Mt 5:1-12a

“We are God’s children.... We will be like God, for we will see God as God is” (1 Jn 3:2)

Prologue: “God wants us to be *saints*” is Pope Francis’ finest definition of ‘*who*’ God—who created us in the divine image and likeness—wants you and me to *be*. This line appears in the opening paragraph of our pope’s 2018 Apostolic Exhortation ‘*Gaudete et Exsultate*’, meaning, ‘Rejoice and Be Glad!’ Though we commemorate the lives of a galaxy of famous saints all through the year, on this Solemnity of ‘All Saints’ we remember the many anonymous saints, innumerable ordinary Christians who’ve lived extraordinarily holy lives and who have not officially been canonized. So, today, let us reflect on: (a) Christ, the model of holiness; (b) The Church, called to be holy; and, (c) You and me—who God wants to be saints; yes, all, without exception.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Today’s gospel passage—the ‘*Beatitudes*’, from the Latin ‘*beatus*’, meaning, ‘blessed’—from St Matthew, shows Jesus going “up the mountain” (v.1) for a ‘Sermon on the Mount’. Just as Moses gave the ten commandments atop Mount Sinai, the ‘New Moses’ Jesus now preaches new ideals. Each beatitude describes the life of Christ Himself: perfectly holy, fully blessed. Jesus *is* and *incarnates* all the values and *does* all the ideals that the Beatitudes proclaim. This inevitably leads Jesus to the cross, and beyond, to the resurrection! All Saints’ Day suggests that the saints are those who were and grew so fully Christ-like as described in the first part of the Beatitudes—namely, they were poor in spirit, wept with others, meek, hungered for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted for the sake of justice and suffered calumny—that they now partake of the promises of the second part. Truly, theirs is the kingdom of heaven; they are now comforted; they have inherited the “land” of the kingdom of God; they hunger and thirst no more; they are enjoying the heavenly banquet; they have obtained mercy; they have seen God, and achieved the fullness of divine daughtership or sonship. What more would they want now except to rejoice and be glad? In sum, the nine beatitudes show the active and passive sides of a Christian’s relationship with God—depending totally on God’s grace and blessing, on the one hand, while working wholeheartedly to imbibe values in imitation of Our Lord, Jesus, on the other.
2. The first reading from the Book of Revelation must be understood in the context of the trials faced by the early Church and Christians. Written around the year 96 A.D., John the seer verbalizes his vision that many Christians would be martyred. He also seeks to assure them that the persecutions against the Christian community—probably by Emperor Domitian—is the prelude of the end-time, when God will vindicate his martyrs. Thus, the seer describes the triumphant state that awaits them in the symbolic language of white robes, palms, and the singing of songs of triumph: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” (v.12) This was probably a paschal hymn sung by the early Church. The number 144,000—symbolic number of 12 tribes x 12 x 1,000—is often misinterpreted by cults like the Jehovah’s Witnesses and others to signify the ‘redeemed ones’—which, of course, always includes them and excludes everyone else! It’s dangerous to literally and naively interpret texts like this one. Rather, note that “the great multitude that no one could count, [comes] from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (v.9). If this is not catholic and universal, what is it?

3. The second reading from the 1st letter of St John was written to condemn heresies that were plaguing the churches around 100 A.D. The heretical Gnostics denied the true humanity of Christ and believed that they possessed a kind of ‘hotline’ to God. Consequently, they boasted about their superior *gnosis* (Greek, for ‘knowledge’), and felt that there was no need to lead moral lives since their bodies were anyway to be freed from their superior minds. Against such aberrations, Paul preaches that at the heart of all virtue is God’s grace: “See what love [God] the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we *are!*” (v.1). The awareness of the gratuitous inheritance and identity as “children of God” (divine gift) ought to evoke in all Christians a deep desire to: “purify themselves, just as he [God] is pure” (human task). Paul’s imperative for sainthood, then, is to “become what you *are*”: holy, saints, children of God! This implies growing into the full stature of what God wants of us. In fact, the New Testament calls *all* baptized Christians ‘holy ones’ (Greek, *hagioi*).

Linking the Psalm (24) to the Theme of Saints and Holiness: The response: “Such is the company of those who seek your face, O God” shows that this psalm does not aim for personal piety, praise or penance like most of the other psalms, but is a liturgical psalm probably used in early times to accompany a procession of pilgrims at the threshold of entering the temple. It was probably sung by two choirs antiphonally, with one choir asking: “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?” and the other replying: “Those who have clean hands and a pure heart ...” Obviously, celebrating ‘All Saints’, the temple becomes a figure for the consummated kingdom of heaven—those “blessed” and “children of God” and “144,000” who are saints in heaven.

Listen to the Voices of Saintly Christians of Our Day:

Blessed Carlo Acutis (called home by God aged 15 years, beatified on October 2020): “The only thing we have to ask God for, in prayer, is the desire to be holy.”

St Mother Teresa: “I am not sure exactly what heaven will be like, but I know that when we die and when the time comes for God to judge us, He will not ask, ‘How many good things have you done in your life?’ rather God will ask, ‘How much love did you put into what you did?’”

Pope Francis: “To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious.... But ... We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. Are you called to the consecrated life? Be holy by living out your commitment with joy. Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by labouring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain.” [from ‘*Gaudete et Exsultate*’, 2018, n.14]

In Lighter Vein: A famous, old priest lay on his deathbed, surrounded by his junior-priests extolling his virtues. One remarked: “Father is as wise as Solomon.” Said another, “His faith is so strong.” A third added, “He’s such an able leader.” And the fourth exclaimed, “What a powerful speaker!” When all had left, the dying priest looked sad. His sacristan asked: “Father, aren’t you happy at everyone praising you?” The priest replied, “No! Nobody mentioned my holiness.” Some folks *are* holy; others *think* they’re holy; still others want everyone to *proclaim* that they are holy. By contrast, true saints *are* holy; they neither *think* they are holy nor expect others to *proclaim* them holy. They rest content in striving to be saints by being Christlike.
