

Solemnity of All Saints
November 1, 2011
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Society
celebrated at
St. Clare Roman Catholic Church, 2301 N. Washington Ave.
Scranton, PA
Matthew 5:1-12a
Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14

In honor of the saints on this their solemnity, we read the same Gospel every year. The Beatitudes from the fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel are descriptive, in that they describe the character of the saints. They are not prescriptive in the way that commandments are, as if on cue we could assume the characteristic of meekness. They aren't telling us what to do as much as they are telling us what we will become as throughout our lives we are conformed more and more to the character of Christ.

We see in the lives of the saints that this is precisely what happened to them. As they grew in holiness, they increased in mercy. As the process of sanctification bore fruit in their lives, they hungered and thirsted more for righteousness. Likewise, this attachment to the holy, as it took hold in their lives, meant that they mourned more and more the sins of the world. As they became more aware of their own sin, they grew in meekness, assuming the humble posture of those who are in need of redemption. Their confidence in salvation by the blood of the Lamb led them to share this Good News and so participate in breaking down the wall of hostility separating men from God. Truly they are peacemakers of the highest sort.

But none of these virtues are original to them. Indeed, if we contemplate the Beatitudes, we will come to the realization that they describe Christ Himself. He is poor in spirit, He mourns, He is meek, He is pure in heart. Jesus Himself personifies what it means to be blessed, the crowning description being that which comes last: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." This is precisely what happened to Jesus first: the innocent man was condemned to death as a traitor and threat to the well-being of the Jewish people.

Herein is the tie to our first lesson from the Book of Revelation. The saints before the Throne of Grace are those who have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb, but there is a characteristic we might miss if we don't listen closely. Our lesson today says that the saints have palm branches in their hands; they carry the symbol of martyrdom, having emulated the example of Jesus even unto death. They have been so conformed to the character of Christ that they have suffered as Jesus suffered. They have died as Jesus died.

The union of Jesus Christ and the saints is so intimate that they resemble our Lord in heaven. They have been conformed to Him to such a degree that they are holy as He is holy; they are sacrificial lambs as He is the Sacrificial Lamb. In uniting their sacrifice to Christ's own sacrifice, the saints have participated in the redemption of the world.

This union between Christ and His saints is reflected in many ways in our worship. For one, we assist at the sacrifice of the Mass in a church under the patronage of one of the saints, a patronage attached to this building until the building is no more. This church will always be St. Clare Church, even though it is now a chapel of St. Paul's parish. Second, the relics of the saints are physically present in the church where the Mass is celebrated. Just as Jesus is physically present to us under the forms of bread and wine, so we find the relics of the saints embedded in the altar where the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass takes place. Third, at every Mass that is offered the priest, who stands in the place of Jesus Christ, invokes the intercession of the saints,

who pray with Jesus to our heavenly Father for our salvation. In both the general intercessions and the actual canon of the Mass, the saints are named in union with Jesus as powerful advocates on our behalf.

Therefore, when we receive Holy Communion, we must remember everyone to whom we are united. We remember first our Lord, Whose Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity we consume; but we remember also the saints who are united to Him. It is easy for us to imagine our unity with our brothers and sisters we can see kneeling next to us at the altar rail. But we must also remember the millions upon millions we cannot see, not only those who walk the earth now, but even more so the multitudes, which no man can number, who have gone before us and who now live with Christ in heaven.

In that the saints are united to Jesus Christ, are members of His Body, they are united to each other. Therefore, the holy and life-giving friendships that we enjoy on earth will see their continuation and fulfillment in the life to come. Death is not the end of our bond with friends we've had in this life, but the entrance into close friendships with innumerable people we have never met in person. The Eucharist, our reception of Holy Communion, is the prefigurement of the bonds that will be forged in full only after we have passed from this life. How then do we get from here to there?

Since sanctification is the means by which the Beatitudes gradually apply to us, the key to becoming like the saints and fully one with Christ is to receive the graces that make this transformation possible. These graces are available to us primarily through the Sacraments, so frequent confession and reception of Holy Communion are the pillars of a life being conformed to the character of Christ. Study the lives of the saints and one learns that this is true for nearly all of them. The sacraments accelerate sanctification.

Recalling that the saints are fully in union with Jesus, there is another thing we can do, something I do myself, and which I commend to you. Note that in the lesson from Revelation, the saints include people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues." Thus, there are bound to be saints with whom we have much in common, even beyond the unity of faith that binds us so closely. There are those who will have an understanding of our manner of life, our station in life, our country of origin that exceeds the understanding of others among the sanctified brethren. Develop a devotion to the saints who "get you," those to whom you can relate and who can relate to you. Having faced such similar challenges, they will know what graces are required – and should be asked for – as we progress towards the sanctification that will see its fulfillment at the Last Day. My personal liturgy to the saints includes Jesus' mom and step-dad, our community's patrons, all four American saints, my patron for confirmation, and St. Peter Claver, the Patron of Colombia and self-professed slave of the slaves. If we seek union with Christ, we must appeal to those who have already seen its consummation. How much better if we appeal to those God has appointed specifically for us!