

Homily for All Saints Day

All Saints Day is a solemnity celebrated on the first day of November. It was instituted to honor all the saints, known and unknown. It's similar to the holidays of Veterans Day and Presidents Day, when a group of people are honored on a specific day. While we have information about many saints, and we honor them on specific days throughout the liturgical year, there are many unknown or unsung saints, who may have been forgotten, or never been honored specifically. Remember, anyone who's in heaven is a saint. And so, on All Saints Day, we celebrate these holy individuals, and ask for their prayers and intercessions.

The concept of All Saints Day is connected to the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. This is the belief that all of God's people in heaven, on earth, and in the state of purification (called purgatory), are spiritually connected and united together as the one Body of Christ. And no, Catholics do not worship saints, including the Blessed Virgin Mary! Worship is for God alone. However, we rightly honor our elder brothers and sisters in Christ who have already run the race and have inherited heaven. And just as we can ask one another on earth to pray for us to God, so we can ask those men and women already in the fullness of God's presence to pray for us to Him. And Christians have been honoring saints and martyrs, and asking for their intercession, since at least the 2nd century AD. (Just as a reminder, martyrs are those people who were killed for their faith in Jesus).

So in 370 AD, for example, St. Ephraim the Syrian wrote, “You victorious martyrs who endured torments gladly for the sake of our God and Savior, you who have boldness of speech toward the Lord himself, you saints, intercede for us who are timid and sinful men, full of sloth, that the grace of Christ may come upon us, and enlighten the hearts of all of us that so we may love him.”

Now in the early days, Christians were accustomed to celebrate the anniversary of a martyr's death for Christ at the place of their martyrdom. At first, only martyrs, like St. John the Baptist, were honored by a special day. But, other saints were added gradually, and increased in number when the standard process of canonization was established. Pope Boniface IV in the early 600s AD consecrated the former temple to all the Roman gods, called the Pantheon, in Rome to the Blessed Virgin and all the martyrs, ordering a yearly liturgical celebration. Then, Pope Gregory III in the 700s consecrated a chapel in the Basilica of St. Peter to all the saints and fixed this annual celebration on November 1st. In the 800s, Pope Gregory IV extended this celebration of All Saints Day on November 1st to the entire Church.

The vigil (or the eve) of All Saints Day has grown up in the English-speaking countries as a festival in and of itself called All Hallows Eve, or Halloween. Many customs of Halloween reflect the Christian belief that on the feast of All Saints we mock evil, because as Christians, evil has no real power over us. Unfortunately, today, little credence is given to the true source of our power over evil – our Lord Jesus Christ – who died for our sins and rose triumphantly from the grave. The day after All Saints Day is called All Souls Day, and is a day to remember and offer up prayers on behalf of all of all those who have died – the faithful departed.

BUT WHY DOES ALL THIS MATTER? It matters because, if the simplest definition of a saint is anyone who's in heaven, then we are all called to be saints. Do you know that? Do you believe that? That you and I are called to be saints because God redeemed us for perfect union with Him for all of eternity!

Again, normally when we think of the saints, we think of men and women like the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Peter, or Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta or Pope Saint John Paul II. But, guess what? We're not called to be them! God formed us in our mother's womb, and He called us to be us – to be the best version of ourselves. So, how do we do that? Not by ourselves, that's for sure! Left to ourselves, we fall into bad habits, old ways, and are attracted to sinful things. That's just the reality of being a human being living in a broken world. That's why we needed a Savior – to save us from ourselves!

My brothers and sisters, we must have a real, living, personal, daily relationship with God. A real, living, personal relationship with Him! And that's what the saints can teach us – union with God. How do you think some of them had the courage to be willing to lose their lives for Jesus, like the martyrs? Or how do you think some of them founded orphanages that cared for the poorest of the poor in India that no one else wanted, like Mother Theresa? Or, how do you think some of them were just so holy, that when they died the largest gathering of statesmen in all of history with over 4 million mourners took place, like happened with John Paul II?

Do you take time each day just to talk to God from your heart? If you don't know how, just start trying. Just talk to God and tell Him your struggles, and how you want to be kind and merciful and patient and loving – in short, to be holy. This is what the saints all did, each in their own unique way! And this is what each of us must do if we truly want to be saints, if we truly want to be in heaven! God bless you.