

ALL SAINTS DAY – November 1, 2009
(Fr. Jerry Kopacek)

Sister was explaining the life and death of St. John the Baptist to her class; she ended by saying that St. John was beheaded by order of King Herod but now he enjoys eternal happiness and wears a martyr's crown." One of Sister's students then raised his hand and asked "But where does he wear it?" Not a bad question, huh?? Today we honor St. John the Baptist, St. Edward and all the other saints on this great feast of All Saints. Since this holy day of obligation falls on Sunday this year, it takes precedence over the Sundays of Ordinary Time (which will resume next week).

Every time we say the Apostles' Creed we profess our belief in the communion of saints—the truth that everyone who is united with Christ are also united with (in communion with) each other. And this is a union that is not broken by death. In fact, it is still appropriate and accurate to speak of the threefold nature of the Church in connection with the communion of saints:

1. the Church militant—those of us in this earthly life who try to follow Jesus and grow in holiness against temptations to sin and selfishness;
2. the Church suffering—the souls in purgatory; those who died in the state of grace but are still in need of purification of any remaining attachment to or effects of sin (we pray for them in a special way tomorrow—on All Souls Day); and
3. the Church triumphant—the saints now in heaven (whether formally canonized by the Church or not) and who live in eternal and perfect joy and peace in the immediate presence of God.

Vatican II reaffirms this idea in the Constitution on the Church: "[A]t the present time some of [the Lord's] disciples are pilgrims on earth. Others have died and are being purified, while still others are in glory, contemplating 'in full light, God...exactly as he is.'" It is the Church in this last sense—the Church triumphant—that is the special focus of this All Saints Day. We honor and celebrate the memory of those great heroes of our faith, those disciples of Jesus who persevered to the end. How wonderfully God has blessed the Church and the world over these last 2000 years in giving us so many different models of sanctity and holiness from every time and place, from every race and nationality, from every walk of life and socio-economic background.

The saints are a great gift and grace for us—we are joined to them by our mutual connection with Jesus, and thus we are able to love and follow the saints and ask their prayers and help for us and our loved ones. How many of us have asked St. Anthony to pray for us as we look for something we misplaced? Trust me, I'm one of St. Anthony's regular clients... How often do we ask St. Jude to pray for us regarding something that seems especially difficult or even hopeless? How about asking St. Joseph to pray for us for the grace of a blessed death—he who died in the presence of Jesus and Mary? Or asking St. Monica's prayerful help for those who have fallen away from the practice of their faith—she who prayed for years for her son Augustine before he finally embraced the true faith?

It is indeed good for us to do these things—to remember the saints and to ask them to pray for us and help us in our needs. Some of our non-Catholic friends do not understand our devotion to the saints and indeed fear that we worship them or somehow make them God's equals. "Why pray to the saints?" they ask; "why not pray directly to God?" They see our statues and other images of saints and may even think we worship them in violation of God's commandment against making graven images.

First, we most definitely do **not** worship the saints. Worship and adoration is given to God and God alone—He who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It would indeed be the sin of idolatry if we were to put any of the saints (even the Blessed Mother herself) on the same level as God. Rather, we honor and venerate the saints; we hold them in great esteem and look to them as examples and models of holiness that we seek to imitate. The saints are the heroes of our faith; it is only fitting that we honor them.

Regarding praying to the saints or (to be more accurate) asking the saints to pray for us: of course we can pray directly to God and we should certainly do so. God, of course, is the ultimate source of all that is good, true and of worth. But think about this: if you or a loved one is seriously ill or in real need, what is one of the first things you do? You ask others to pray for you or your loved one—you ask others to go directly to God with your needs just as you yourself will do. In fact, Sacred Scripture often tells us to pray for others. That's just what we do when we approach the saints—since they now enjoy the fullness of God's presence, we ask them to pray to God for us, to present our needs to the Lord as we do ourselves. What about those statues and other images of the saints? Of course we don't worship them. They are simply visible reminders to us of these great heroes of our faith who are our brothers and sisters in Christ and who are definitely on our side. If we can have pictures of our children, parents, and other family members on our walls, in our wallets or purses or anywhere else, surely we can have these images of the saints who are with us as part of the great family of God.

The saints are indeed great models and examples for us, and they challenge us to seek holiness and to do the will of God just as they did. We may think the saints are too far above us such that we could never hope to imitate them, but that is simply not true. The saints are human just like us, and they lived with the struggles and weaknesses of life just like us—in other words, the saints were sinners just like us. St. Augustine before his conversion gave in to temptations of lust. St. Francis of Assisi grew up in a wealthy family and wasted a lot of time and money in frivolity before he finally responded more deeply to that persistent call from Christ. St. Jerome, who gave us a translation of the Bible that the Church has used for centuries, had a temper that could get ferocious at times. The saints experienced frustrations large and small like we do. There is a famous story of St. Teresa of Avila (a great reformer of the Carmelite Order and a spiritual writer of great depth): she was once on her way to visit another convent and the journey was very difficult. With more than a little impatience, she asked “How much longer, Lord, are you going to put difficulties in the way of your servant?” She said that Jesus replied: “Teresa, this is the way I treat my friends”, to which she responded “Ah Lord, that surely must be the reason you have so few of them!”

Of course, the saints showed their humanity in other ways as well. We may think that the saints always engaged in serious discipline like fasting and so forth. They did, but they were not above enjoying the legitimate pleasures of life. St. Katherine Drexel, founder of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, once wrote to her bishop about her fasting. But she asked if she could eat chocolates once a year since (in her words) “to deny myself such rare treats would surely be the sin of ingratitude”. All you choco-holics out there, take heart—St. Katherine is on your side! The saints were also people of joy and often had a good sense of humor. One of my favorites stories here is about Blessed John XXIII who was pope from 1958 to 1963 (in the lifetime of at least some of us...); he has been beatified (thus his title of “Blessed”) and his cause for canonization (as a saint) is still in process. He was once asked by a reporter how many people worked in the Vatican. The good Pope John replied “oh, about half of them!”

The saints were not perfect in their earthly lives—they struggled with sin and temptation, and they didn't always say ‘no’ to those things. They had their idiosyncrasies, their faults, their problems—in other words, they were just like us. But they became saints because they acknowledged their sins and weaknesses, and with the help of God's grace, they sought to know and do his will, and they persevered in the struggle to grow in holiness. That's the key to sanctity and to sainthood: desiring, seeking and doing the will of God as best as we can and to do so for the love of God. That's something that we are not only capable of doing; it's also something that God calls us to do. Jesus and Jesus alone is the way, the truth and the life—the one and only path to heaven. The saints show us that it is possible by the mercy of God to follow that way and reach that goal. May God's grace and the powerful intercession of all the saints fill us all with that same desire so we may strive for and attain the joy and glory that is eternally theirs.

