

Feast of All Saints – 2020

Given the numbers we are talking about in today's first reading and our own knowledge of the saints and how diverse they were in temperament and the work they accomplished and the sufferings they went through and all the rest, we might feel hard pressed to identify a common characteristic that applies to sainthood in every case. Is it their piety, their courage, their willingness to suffer for the sake of God? Or are those characteristics more like the results of sanctity rather than the cause of it?

In the vision from the Book of Revelation the author says that the common feature of all the saints is that "They are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb." Although the statement is still hard to interpret in many respects it does seem to indicate that sanctity has to do with perseverance in the face of persecution and hardship and is intimately tied to the sacrifice of Christ.

Being a saint does require effort. Even if a person has the good fortune to live in relatively quiet times, courage is required to confront the evil that temptation brings, in whatever form that takes. There are probably not too many people who spent their days on earth giving in to every temptation that were able to skip over the experience of purgatory.

The reading from the letter of St. John brings another perspective to the question, though. St. John would rather have us focus on what God does in the life of a saint rather than the heroic efforts of the saints themselves. He

Feast of All Saints – 2020

locates the common characteristic of sainthood in the fact that we have been made God's children, and that's not something we have done but something that has been done to us. By virtue of our baptism we already have the essential ingredient for being counted among that great multitude mentioned in the Book of Revelation. When talking about the saints, this seems like the best place to start.

Actually, that is how St. Paul uses the term "saint." In his letters he writes things like *"Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, ... grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* (Phil. 1:1-2) and *"Give my greetings to every holy one in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send you their greetings; all the saints send you their greetings, especially those of Caesar's household."*

The same use of the term is also used in the letter to the Hebrews:

"Greetings to all your leaders and to all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings."

When the New Testament writers talked about the saints the primary way they used the term was to refer to the members of the Christian community in a particular place. Everyone in the community was considered to be a "saint" because they were already members of the Body of Christ and the household of God.

Feast of All Saints – 2020

That's important for us to remember, too, because it's a reminder that the kernel of sanctity, our saintly DNA is already present within us. It's part of our own native makeup. It's not something we have to incorporate from outside, but is at the core of our very being and is the basis of our true personhood and identity. How St. John puts it is "we are God's children now: what we shall be has not yet been revealed." As true as it may be that we have a lot of growing to do before our sanctity becomes obvious, it's helpful to know that it is there, already within us. We do not have to start from scratch. God has already gotten the ball rolling.

To keep it rolling we can use descriptions of the saints like what we find in today's Gospel. All these ways of being blessed are part of what is available to us already: we can already practice humility or poverty of spirit; we can already develop a thirst for righteousness and try to live our lives with clean hearts; we can already seek to serve the cause of peace; we can already suffer persecution gladly when we know it will serve the kingdom of God.

It's fun to dress up as a favorite saint on the Feast of All the Saints, but it's important to remember that, whatever clothes we put on, they always are the wardrobe of a saint in the making because we have been made so by God's gracious will.