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June 18, 2017

7500 Mahogany Drive, Fort Smith, AR 72917

Sunday of all Saints of North America

"... from this day, from this hour, from this minute let us strive to love God above all else and to fulfill His holy will"

...St. Herman of Alaska

The Saints: Examples of holiness

by Fr. Steven Kostoff

We recently celebrated the Great Feast of Pentecost. All of the subsequent Sundays of the liturgical year, until the pre-lenten Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee sometime next year, will be so numbered, challenging us to keep our spiritual sight on the overwhelming significance of Pentecost in the divine economy. The New Testament era of the Church began its existence on the Day of Pentecost with the Spirit's descent as a mighty rushing wind that took on the form of fiery tongues alighting upon the heads of the future apostles [Acts 2:1-13]. The Church has always existed, but the Church as a remnant of Israel that would flourish and grow with the addition of the Gentiles began its final phase of existence with the death, resurrection and ascension of God's Messiah, Jesus Christ Who, seated at the right hand of the Father, would send the Holy Spirit into the world and upon "all flesh" on the day of Pentecost. As Saint Epiphanius of Cyprus wrote in the fourth century, "The Catholic Church, which exists from the ages, is revealed most clearly in the incarnate advent of Christ." The simple calendar rubric of numbering the Sundays after Pentecost is one way of reminding us of this essential truth of the Christian Faith. The Church is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and in and through the sacramental life of the Church we experience something like a permanent pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The first two Sundays after Pentecost are dedicated to the saints—the first, to All Saints, and **the second, to local Saints, in our case, the Saints that have shown forth in North America.** We commemorate all of the saints of the Church – men, women and children—from her beginning to the present day, including the "patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, ascetics and every righteous spirit made perfect in faith." That is, the entire "cloud of witnesses" that surround us and pray for us while serving as models for our own faith. God has revealed to the Church His innumerable saints, and we rejoice in their continuous presence, made possible by the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. The divine and co-eternal Spirit, holy by nature, makes human beings holy by grace. That is why these particular Sundays fall so naturally after the Sunday of Pentecost.

The word we use for “saint” is the Greek word for “holy” – agios. In a real sense, we are celebrating the presence of holiness in the world, incarnate in actual flesh and blood human beings. The descent of the Holy Spirit makes it possible for human beings to become and remain holy. Without the Holy Spirit, human beings can be nice, pleasant and even good – but not holy. And it is the holiness of the saints that is their one common characteristic, expressed in an endless diversity of vocations. Every baptized and chrismated member of the Church is already a saint – a person sanctified and set apart as a member of the People of God – and every such member has the vocation to become a saint. The phrase often used to capture this paradox of the Christian life is “become what you already are.” This phrase expresses an entire lifetime of striving and struggle to attain, by God’s grace, the highest of vocations – the holiness of a genuine child of God, “born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” [John 1:13]. Of this we are reminded in the Gospel reading for the Sunday of All Saints: “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father Who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father Who is in heaven.... He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” [Matthew 10:32-33, 37-38].

We probably have a difficult time relating to such a passage, since we expend an enormous amount of energy – time, talent and treasure—in order to guarantee for ourselves a comfortable life and the closest of possible family relationships. God and Church may be a part of that choice, but perhaps only as one compartment of life among many. At times, the greatest of our goals may be to create a certain form of “domestic bliss,” to the extent that this is humanly attainable. Nothing else can seem greater or more desirable. Jesus, however, makes other claims on us. And the first of those radical claims is that we must love Him above all else – including father and mother, son and daughter. This is a “hard teaching.” Perhaps it is here that we discover the greatest “achievement” of the saints, and the reason behind the sanctity that they often so clearly manifest. They simply loved Christ before all else. And there is nothing that can deflect them from that love. But in no way does this diminish our love for our loved ones. I believe that if we love Christ before all else, then we would have a greater love for those around us, including our very family members. To love Christ above all else is to expand our very notion and experience of love. If we live “in Christ,” we can then love “in Christ.” Elsewhere, Jesus would claim that this would include our enemies! This is a love that will not disappoint. With any other deeper love, there is always the lurking temptation of succumbing to one form of idolatry or another. Jesus even says that if we love anyone else more than Him, we are not “worthy” of Him! Clearly, there is nothing easy about bearing the name of Christ and calling oneself a Christian. Is all of this impossible? Jesus teaches that “with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” [Matthew 19:26].

We share the most difficult of vocations – to live up to our high calling in Christ Jesus. This is not something that we achieve on our own, but a process that includes the grace of God and our own self-determination, what we call our freedom of choice or “free will.” There are obstacles that begin with the genetic and the environmental. There are distractions and temptations too numerous to keep track of. There is the unbelief of the world around us. Yet, if we approach this “day by day,” we soon realize that we are simply trying to become genuine human beings, for the glory of God is a human being fully alive, to paraphrase Saint Irenaeus of Lyons. As disciples of Christ, we have the “inside track” to allow us to “run with perseverance the race that is before us” [Hebrews 12:1]. So, we thank God for the multitude of the saints who not only set an example for us, but who also pray for us unceasingly in the Kingdom of God.

Romans 2:10-16 (*Epistle*)

Brethren; glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God. For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law

written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

Hebrews 11:33-12:2 (*Epistle, Saints*)

Brethren, those who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God

Matthew 4:18-23 (*Gospel*)

At that time as Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” They immediately left their nets and followed Him. Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him. And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people.

Matthew 4:25-5:12 (*Gospel, Saints*)

At that time great multitudes followed Him – from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan. And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Looking Ahead:

Wednesday, June 28th Vespers for the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul 6 p.m.

Thursday, June 29th Divine Liturgy of the Feast 9 a.m.

***The Sanctuary candle is given by Jim, Patt & Sophie Kolettis
To celebrate all Fathers, Grandfathers & Godfathers***

If you would like to sponsor a Sanctuary Candle there is a sign-up sheet in the Narthex, suggested donation is \$20. The candle is lit on Saturday before Vespers and special prayers are said, it burns over the Altar for one week.

COMMUNITY RESCUE MISSION NEEDS:

Baby diapers – all sizes

Feminine products

Denture cleaner

Band-aids and antibiotic cream

Sunblock for children

Razors

Bath soaps

Cases of water

Please leave on the table in the Parish Hall

**Saturday Vespers 6 p.m.
Sunday Hours 9:05 a.m.
Sunday Divine Liturgy 9:30 a.m.**

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