

Sunday of All Saints
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Every human that has ever lived, or will ever live, from the time of Adam and Eve until the time of the return of our Lord, has only one calling. It's very simple. There's only one thing God asks of us. To be holy. The Church sets before us all the saints, known and unknown, on the Sunday after the great Feast of Pentecost, the Descent of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to make us holy. The word 'saint' simply means 'holy one'. The Holy Spirit comes to fulfill in humans the very thing for which God created humans.

St. Peter instructs us in this way: "As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,¹⁶ because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy" (1Pt 1:15-16; cf. 2Cor 7:1; 1Thess 4:7; Heb 12:14). St. Peter is referring us back to Leviticus when God told His people Israel: "For I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy" (Lev 11:44). Our Lord expresses a similar expectation to be like our heavenly Father: "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt 5:48). "Be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful" (Lk 6:36). We are called to live a divine life, the life of our Father. That's our calling. It's very simple.

When I say that we are called to be holy, I do *not* mean that we are to *make ourselves* holy. It's easy for us to fall into the trap of getting things exactly backwards: that we need to become holy so that we will be acceptable to God *and only then* will he come be with us, live in us. This attitude, however pervasive it is, creates a burden too heavy to bear. We are not able to make ourselves worthy of God's healing presence. And if we try, we are likely to suffer from feelings of guilt and discouragement, even despondency, in our spiritual life that gradually infect our entire being.

God's approach is exactly the opposite. On the first and great Feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples in order to transform them. Even after the resurrection they were fearful and confused, uncertain and unreliable. Their final questions to Jesus before His Ascension was, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6); even up to the last moment of Christ on this earth, they are still looking for an *external* deliverance from political oppression instead of an *internal* salvation from passions and death. With the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of fiery tongues (Acts 2:1-4), they experience the Kingdom of God that is within (Lk 17:21) and then go out to preach what they've experienced. Like the Apostles, all the known and unknown saints, having believed through their word, are made holy by their volitional responsiveness to the work of the Holy Spirit in them. They all lived with the inner awareness of divine Life dwelling within them and transforming them. We don't clean up our own lives; God cleans them up for us--if we let him.

This is apparent in the prayers we say in the life of the Church, but we often don't notice the importance of the very words we're praying. Consider the prayer to the Holy Spirit that we started praying again last Sunday for the first time since Holy Pascha: "O heavenly King, the Comforter ..." We affirm in this prayer that the Holy Spirit is "everywhere present and filling all things." But that is not sufficient for us, for the Holy Spirit to simply be present with us. We go on to beseech him to come and abide in us, to dwell in us, to make his home in us. We want to be the tabernacle, the temple, of the Holy Spirit. We want a *relationship*, not just a presence.

Then what do we say immediately after asking the Holy Spirit to dwell in us? We pray, "cleanse us from every stain, and save our souls." It's very important to be attentive to the words we say in the prayers. We don't cleanse ourselves from stains so as to make ourselves ready, worthy, acceptable for the Holy Spirit to enter us. Rather we beseech the Holy Spirit to dwell in us in order to do what we are not able to do on our own, to cleanse us from the sins that are incompatible with holiness. The Holy One enters and pushes out everything that is incompatible with His holy presence.

All of our prayers in the Church are of this form. It is *God* who forgives, cleanses, heals, frees, enlightens, and he does so from the inside out--by transforming our hearts into which he has poured out his love (Rom 5:5). It is always God who does the work, and the prayers we pray are always us asking God to do what we are not able to do; what we need him to do for us. "Apart from me," our Lord says, "you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

So when I say that each and every human being is called to be holy, I want to emphatically say that I am not saying we are called to make ourselves holy. I'm asking us to beseech God to make us holy. For us to follow what all the saints from all time, known and unknown, did--namely, to let God make them holy, to cooperate with His work in their lives when he responds to their prayers for holiness.

We had this morning, before the Divine Liturgy, beautiful images given us to in the Akathist for All Saints. One such image is that the saints are like the stars in the heavens; they are stars in the firmament of the Church. They are lights, luminous. When we recognize someone as a saint, we say that we glorify him. And this glory is of course a manifestation of the luminous glory of Christ. We don't create saints; we recognize them. And, in particular, we recognize the light that shines forth from their life even after their death as being the light of Christ, and not their own light.

In the imagery of the Akathist, the stars are not simply lights to be observed, but they are given to us as a *navigational* guide. We are a ship on the sea looking to the stars in order to know

which way to point our vessel, which way to direct our lives. The saints are living, navigational signposts in our Christian life. They have traveled this road before us, and they have done so successfully trusting in God instead of themselves.

The imagery of the Akathist continues by telling us we're sailing on the sea of our own passions. Maybe we have the image of a crystal clear and calm sea, but that's not our life. We're in a storm even as the disciples were on the Sea of Galilee. Fishermen accustomed to being on stormy seas found themselves afraid for their lives in a raging storm, and Jesus sleeping on a pillow in the back of the boat. He's calm; they're frenzied. The disciples go to wake him up saying, "Lord, save us; we are perishing?" (Mt 8:25). The storm of the passions in their souls is more fierce than the storm flooding their boat.

In the midst of being tossed to and fro by the turmoil of our passions, we often feel like God is distant, sleeping in the back of the boat. The question is, do we have the courage to go to Christ and say, with the disciples, "Lord, save me; I'm perishing?" This is how we follow their navigational guidance. The saints help us precisely because they are the people who had the courage to go to Christ and say, "Lord, where are you? Why aren't you caring for me? Why aren't you listening? I'm perishing." The saints are not people who pretended with God, who put on an air of piety in the face of the storms--looking good on the outside but being in stormed-tossed agony on the inside. And what does Jesus do in the face of this honesty? He arises and calms the storms, the inner storms, the storm of the passions.

When we keep our focus on the saints' lives, we are given the strength to travel that same path. We are given the permission to be honest before Christ in the midst of our trials, in the midst of our inner turmoil, our passions. This honesty often takes the form of persistence in the face of God's seeming unresponsiveness. The Psalmist relentlessly beseeches, "Hear me, O Lord, when I cry to you" precisely because it doesn't seem that God is listening. The Canaanite woman incessantly pleads for Jesus' mercy in spite of His cool distance. Such examples can be multiplied countless times over in the lives of the saints.

Why does God seem distant, sleeping, hidden in our time of need? He is trying to get us to go deeper into the recesses of our hearts, beyond the superficial layers of a phony spirituality. God is not interested in our pretend selves; he wants us to go out into the depths of our heart and meet him there. To cry out to him from ever increasing depths, as the Psalmist says, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord" (Ps 129:1). In this way, we cease offering him our own best efforts, and instead cry out to him saying, "I have no hope other than you; apart from you, I can do nothing; I'm perishing without you." This is the saints' inward journey into the Kingdom within, and they invite us to follow them on this path.

In addition to this ‘navigational’ role the saints play in our lives, the Akathist is filled with reminders that they also intercede for us. St. Dorotheos of Gaza says that there are some passions in our lives that are so strong, so deeply rooted in us, that they could never be pulled out were it not for the prayers of the saints. You might say, “What do you mean? Can’t God pull out our passions on His own? Why does he need the help of the saints?” The answer is very simple: God doesn’t act alone. God acts in community. God *is* a community: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He leads and guides His Church by a community, the Holy Synod of Bishops. He calls us together in parishes and monastic communities. A priest is not permitted to serve the Divine Liturgy alone. Indeed, it is not good for us to be alone.

When we gather in the Church for Divine Liturgy, all of the saints that have gone before us, the great cloud of witnesses, are present--not just in the images on the walls. The images are a reminder of their presence, not substitutes. They are praying with us, interceding for us, helping root out those passions that constrain us and distract us from our God. They not only guide us, but they themselves are weeding the garden of our souls by their prayers for us.

So God does not act alone, but through His saints. He did not come to earth alone. He came to a young woman via the Archangel Gabriel so that she could say, ‘Be it done to me according to your word’ (Lk 1:38). So that she could say, I offer my will to you; you who don’t act alone; you who don’t force yourself on anyone; you who don’t invade people’s lives without their free acceptance--I would like you to invade my life. And for this reason she has become the most pure intercessor for us to her Son and our God. By her prayers, and the prayers of all the saints, this is how we become holy--by letting God invade our lives.

Many years ago, I was having a question and answer session with a group of students from Spring Arbor College. They often bring their students here to be exposed to a different expression, as they think of it, of Christianity. This was one of the first times I had done this. When it was over, a hieromonk who happened to be visiting, asked me how it went. I told him, “Pretty well. The students asked good, substantive questions. They were serious about their faith.” Then he said, “Did you ask them any questions?” It hadn’t occurred to me to ask them any questions, but I could tell he would have so I replied, “What would you have asked them?” He said, “I would have asked them, ‘Do you want to be holy?’”

Do you want to be holy? We ask a lot of questions in life. Do I want to be a doctor or an engineer? Do I want to be married or to be a monastic? Do I want to live in this or that type of house, make a certain amount of money, have an influence on society? The only question that matters is, Do I want to be holy? May God, through the prayers of *all* His saints, known and unknown, grant us the simple desire for *him* to make us holy.