

1st. Sunday after Pentecost - All Saints 2017

Today Jesus tells us in no uncertain terms; "If you confess Me before men, I will confess you before my Father in Heaven." All Saints is the commemoration of all those, known and unknown, who have confessed Christ despite the difficulties and dangers of doing so. This confession of Christ is also required of us, not just once at our Baptisms, but again and again throughout our lives. We are all called upon to be "everyday saints."

One of our contemporary teachers, Fr. Lev Gillet, writes; "One must not think of sainthood as an "extraordinary state", nor identify it with extraordinary ascetic exploits or with rare mystical graces...saintliness is simply the state of a soul united to God through the operation of the Holy Spirit. This state of union exists in every Christian whom sin has not separated from God." The Apostolic writers commonly refer to the regular folks of the early Church as saints. Through the redeeming sacrifice of Christ and the gifting of the Holy Spirit, Christians have been re-united with God.

Christians, however, must try their best to live "up" to this new condition and identity. St. Paul reminds all of us, "Do you not understand that you have become temples of the Holy Spirit?" The world, the flesh and the Devil will relentlessly labor to break down our identification with this New Life in us

I think we must be careful not to let the fact that the Church has developed formal categories of saints, Confessors, Martyrs etc., usually great heroes of faith, keep us or discourage us from the awareness of our own calling to live as confessors of Christ. It is perhaps especially difficult for American Christians to think in such terms. We need to remember that Christians in other parts of the World have something of an advantage over us in this regard -- they live in places where it is dangerous and hazardous to be a Christian.

Just last week we heard about an entire busload of Coptic Christians who were killed, martyred, by ISIS. They were all given a choice; deny Christ and convert to Islam or die. Not one of these "regular folks" denied Christ. All were brutally murdered.

This is not an isolated incident, although the news media seldom reports these things. We usually hear perhaps one of every hundred such things. Even so, can any of us avoid asking ourselves how we might respond to such a challenge to our faith?

Of course we cannot possibly answer such a question. No one really knows how he or she will act in such situations. But we can know how we should act. Our Gospel reading this morning is quite clear about that. We can also recognize that there are things we can and must do to prepare ourselves for just such "moments of truth" For even here in America, God will arrange things so that our faith will also be put to the test, not just once, but many times.

How then can we, living as we do in the relative absence of any really dangerous persecution, train ourselves to have the kind of Christian courage that we see in the lives and deaths of those who have earned for themselves the crowns of the martyrs and confessors of Christ? Perhaps some will remember the sermons I gave not too long ago on "The Virtues." Courage was one of the Cardinal virtues. We heard then how wise teachers have always taught that courage is only developed and strengthened by the doing of courageous things. And we have plenty of opportunities for that every day if we are really trying to follow Christ's commandments in our daily lives.

It takes courage to resist the often powerful temptations of our passions and a willingness to endure the suffering we often experience when we would rather indulge ourselves in worldly and sometimes even sinful pleasures. Our demons, the passions, will try and make our lives

miserable when we reject them. There is a very good reason that Christian spiritual life is called Unseen Warfare.

Our challenge is to become "everyday saints" and "everyday confessors" and to join the Clouds of Witnesses to the truth and world transcending value of the Christian Faith. Tomorrow the Church begins another special time of spiritual preparation --- the Apostles Fast. Here is another opportunity for us to practice confessing Christ. Will we be obedient to Him in His Church or not? Are we willing to bear a little physical discomfort for the sake of the Kingdom or not? It really is just that simple on the day-to-day basis of living as an Orthodox Christian.

All of the Church's ascetic practices are designed to help regular people like us become saints -- people in communion with God through the Holy Spirit and to help us keep sin from separating us from that blessing, both here and in the life to come. May God's Grace and the prayers of all the Saints help us and encourage us to overcome the world. Amen.