

**The Celebration of All Saints with the Renewal of Baptismal Vows
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,
St. Francisville, LA**

5 November 2017

I remember the great festivities in my country every “All Saints Day.” For weeks the marching bands would prepare their music for the processions around town, bearers were carefully chosen to carry the statutes of all the saints down cobble stones and busy streets on their way to the church, priests and bishops dressed in beautiful vestments would process at the beginning of the march, right behind the crucifer. It was great drama, great excitement, and great fun. As the procession passed, all of us children would kneel and revere the statutes, with heads bowed down. If we didn’t offer proper respect we would get in trouble with our teachers and priests. The statutes showed people of every color and every age, both male and female, who had shown such great acts of charity and love of others that the church had set them apart as “Special Believers.” They had gone above and beyond in doing what is right and proper for all Christians to do. Before the great festivities, religious education teachers would teach us about extra-good Christians who were able to levitate between heaven and earth, were able to bi-locate and be in two places at once, received the stigmata during times of prayer, healed others just with a look or a touch, or were endowed with supernatural faith and for that reason they marched to their deaths singing songs and praising God.

I used to love “All Saints Day” as a child. It was a day filled with superheroes of the faith and I so desperately wanted to be one of them at the time! But, as I began to grow and ,especially, when I went to seminary, I began to feel differently about this feast. My problem with it was the distance the church had built between these saints and average Christians. By emphasizing all the things that supposedly made these people superior and better, I was confronted daily with my own failures and my own inadequacies. I knew that I would never be able to levitate or bi-locate. Try as hard as I might, I would never get the stigmata, like my beloved St. Francis of Assisi. Regardless of how fervently I prayed I could never heal someone just with a look or a touch. If the “Cloud of Witnesses” was separated between the them and the us, with the “them” being the saints, I was definitely in the “us” group. I was un-special. I was absolutely ordinary and my faith was of the garden variety type. All Saints Day belonged to the Church’s version of the Marvel Universe’s heroes and it had nothing at all to do with me!

Today we celebrate the lives of the saints and rather than thinking about these men and women as Marvel super-heroes, I would like to quote you what our own lectionary notes tells us about them. I quote, “Many of these saints were ordinary men and women of every time and place who lived in an extraordinary way in fidelity to the message of the gospel. These men and women have been

teachers and preachers of the Gospel. They have been founders of religious orders, persons manifesting zeal for Christ. They have been married persons, missionaries, and martyrs who have sacrificed their lives. They have been royal persons, scholars, mystics or ordinary simple individuals. They come from all walks of life and from various parts of the globe. But all these belong to the mystical body of Christ and are ours. They show us through their lives how to live faithfully the Beatitudes of Jesus. In the history of the Church there have been countless others who really are saints, quiet and simple and who are now with God in heaven. Their names may not be in the list of canonized saints of the church but are especially remembered today on this feast day. These saintly men and women whom we remember are blessed and holy and we ought to follow in their footsteps. They were from a variety of regions and spoke a variety of languages, but the one thing they had in common was their acceptance of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the Salvation of the world, and their willingness to lead their lives in accordance with the Good News of his proclamation.” (Lectionary Notes for All Saints Day).

Now, let us say a few words about the origin of this feast. By the 4th Century, there was already a well-established tradition to honor the martyrs of the Church, even though this celebration usually took place on May 13th (IVP New Bible Commentary). By the 7th Century both Martyrs and other saints, whose feasts were not celebrated on a specific day, were included in the celebration of “All Saints”. By the 8th century the feast was moved to November 1st, which was right after the harvest was gathered. This allowed for plenty of food for those who came to the large cities for pilgrimage. Now, even though I want to keep this feast as a feast of remembrance and thanksgiving for the lives of men and women in our church throughout history, I wonder if today is only about the super-good, the super-religious, the super-heroic, the ones whose faith was superior to ours? I wonder if today is only about people with names like “Remigius”, “Ursula”, “Constance”, or “Polycarp”?

The answer to the question depends on your understanding of the word “Saint”. If for you a saint is someone whose manner of life was extraordinary, who is said to have experienced a supernatural type of faith, or who at the right moment sacrificed his life for the advancement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then the answer is “yes.” All Saints Day should be about these holy ones, these men and women the Church has designated as “Saints” because of their manner of life, their great courage, or their special closeness to God. I believe, however, that this feast goes further. The word “Saint” in the original language means “Holy”, which literally means “set apart”. Another translation could be “Consecrated”, and yet another translation could be “Made Special”. When we use the full understanding of the word “saint” as “a holy person”, “a person set apart” for the

service of God, or a person “consecrated” to God, then we can understand “All Saints Day” as the day of celebration in which we give thanks to God for all the “Holy People” both dead and alive that he has set-apart for his service, set-apart for a special relationship with him.

The question now becomes, “how does a person become holy? How is the saint set-apart?” First, in the Old Testament a “holy thing” becomes holy by contact with another holy thing. “For seven days make atonement for the altar and consecrate it. Then the altar will be most holy, and whatever touches it will be holy” (Exodus 29:37). Likewise a High Priest becomes “Holy” by contact with the holy vessels in the Temple. In the New Testament we have the story that comes from the Gospel of John about the resurrection of Lazarus. Lazarus is dead in the tomb, already smelling, buried for four days, totally unable to do anything to set himself apart for the service of God, and totally unable to raise himself from the dead. Yet, Christ, brings him to life. Christ chooses to set him apart. Christ brings him from death into life, from ultimate destruction into ultimate victory. It is Christ who does the setting apart, it is Christ who deems us Holy. It is Christ who makes us “saints”. It is Christ who, out of love and out of compassion, calls us by name to himself, initiates the great relationship, and consecrates us for his service. We are “Holy” because we have come into contact with “The Holy”, better yet, because “The Holy”, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, has come into contact with us!

For us Christians this is exactly what Baptism in the Church does for us. At baptism we are forgiven, we are brought out of the life of sin into a life of victory with Christ, and we are set-apart for the service of God. Christ comes into contact with us. He commissions us to do his work among the nations, to be instruments of his love for those in need, to be the proclaimers of his good news, and to be a blessing to all around us. At baptism we are called into a special relationship with Christ. We are made “Holy”, we are made “Saints”.

Today we celebrate the lives of all of our ancestors who were set-apart for a relationship with Jesus. They were men and women who sat on the pews you are seating, worshipped in front of the same altar, cried for forgiveness on the same kneelers, and were purified through the same waters of baptism. They broke bread together and shared in the Lord’s supper, fully confident of the promises made by Jesus that those who believe in him will live for ever. We owe them a great debt of gratitude and we say thanks for this beautiful worship space they left us, and the Christian inheritance they passed on to us. But, today is about us as well, who at baptism were set-apart for the service of God. As we reaffirm our baptismal vows today God himself calls us “Holy” and “Saints”. Let us pray that we may remain faithful to our baptismal covenant and become ambassadors of Christ to the world, beginning with the people who seat at our dining room tables. Amen!

(This sermon used valuable exegesis from Lutheran Pastor Brian Stoffregen.
<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john11x32.htm>).