

## All Saints + 1 Nov 2023 + Rev 7:2-4, 9-14 + I Jn 3:1-3 + Mt 5:1-12a

Last night, I joined some of our high schoolers for faith formation. During the evening, they were given a series of reflections questions, and 2 of them struck me as questions that are very good for all of us to reflect on, on this Solemnity of all Saints. The 1<sup>st</sup> question was: “who is a mentor to you?” Which is a good question, because all of us, not just teenagers, need someone to look up to. When I was first began in seminary, I really looked up to the older seminarians. After already completing 5 years of college, the idea of going through another 6 years of study was a little daunting to say the least! But I saw the older guys, especially the deacons, as the ones who ‘made it.’ They gave us new men the hope that yes, it was possible to get through, by the grace of God!

When we think of the Saints of God whom we honor today, we might think of them as our mentors, teachers, and “the ones who made it.” As our 1<sup>st</sup> reading from the Book of Revelation says, the Saints are the ones who *really* made it: *these are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb.* When we read about the lives of the Saints, and especially of the martyrs, we are very aware of just how difficult their struggle was—how great the distress in their lives. But, by the grace of God, they still made it: they triumphed.

When we compare the struggles of our lives to theirs, ours may seem rather trivial or insignificant. And yet the struggles are real; maybe not to the point of danger of death. But sometimes it may seem that way in the moment. I’ve always been very encouraged by the Church’s recognizing so-called ‘white martyrdom’: that is, the martyrdom of those who face hatred for their faith, or those who made a total offering to God of their lives, or those who persevered in spite of terrible physical or emotional suffering. We might think of someone like Venerable Francis-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, the late Archbishop of Saigon, who spent 13 years in prison for his faith, with 9 of those being in solitary confinement! We should call to mind such heroes of the faith often, especially when we are in the midst of great suffering. They are a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on: keep going, you can do it! And they know what they are talking about.

Another question the teens were given last night was, “what is your vision of heaven?” It is so important for all of us to have a vision of heaven and call this vision to mind frequently, for a similar reason as we just noted. That is, we have to know what our goal is if we are to keep running the race, especially when we are tired, lost, and doubting whether the end is really worth the means. I think most of the sins people commit can really be boiled down to this root cause: we give up and give in; the world looks just too good to say no too. We forget that all the allurements of the world are but a shadow of the good things to come. And yet when we give in, we wonder why we are still not satisfied. In fact, most the time, we feel worse.

Well, the Saints refused to do that, and they are living proof that, as we said, it can be done. Temptations can be overcome. The Saints overcame because they believed, even to the point of death, that the Life in the world to come was better than anything this life can offer us, and that only the infinite God can satisfy our infinite desires. And so their faith gave them the power to move mountains and conquer the world.

Now when it comes to speaking of the Saints, I think it is tempting to think, well, *I'm no Saint*. Ok, but you can be! Anyone can be a Saint. The *blood of the Lamb* was shed for all of us, making a way for us to be forgiven, and to be a Saint. But that doesn't mean heaven is automatic. The road to heaven is marked by the way of the Beatitudes, as we hear in our Gospel today. And I don't think any of the characteristics of the blessed ones are easy or popular. Being poor, or meek, or righteousness-seeking, or merciful will not win you an election or gain you followers on social media. But it will get you to heaven. We need to remind ourselves of the reward promised us, especially in those moments of mourning and persecution for the sake of righteousness.

Finally, lest anyone accuse our hope of heaven as being pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die, our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today from the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of St. John reminds us that heaven already begins now. Through Baptism, we are already God's children. *What we shall be has not yet been revealed. But we do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.* And that seeing, that immediacy of the presence of the Lord, is heaven. Until then, we already have heaven alive in our hearts, through faith and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has the power to make all of us Saints, if we believe and persevere to the end.