

Who Are These?

In the name of our Shepherd who guides us to springs of living water, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's first reading, the beloved once disciple of Jesus and now the aged Apostle John, is given a vision of surpassing splendor. He sees at center raised up on an immense dais the throne of God. There sits in majestic glory the Holy One, the Ancient of Days. And beside him sharing the throne is the Lamb of God who has taken away the sins of the world. Stepping down from that height, on a lower level, the twenty four elders are seated. On their heads are crowns of life: wreaths of green laurel. And near them are the four living creatures. Each has four faces: that of an eagle, an ox, a lion, and a man. They represent all of creation, and they are the beings that lead and direct worship here in the heavenly throne room. Before this awesome spectacle a vast multitude in white robes stands in joyful assembly. They are people from every nation, tribe, race, and tongue. In their hands are festive palm branches. They wave them like banners as they give thanks to God and to the Lamb for their salvation. And all around are countless ranks of the heavenly hosts, bright shining angels, the mighty warriors of God. And when the command is given, this colossal congregation of humans and angels all together as one fall on their faces before the Lord, ascribing to him all blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, and might now and forever.

John is overwhelmed by what he sees. He's so enraptured trying to take it all in that he fails to notice that one of the elders has left his seat and straddled up alongside him. He leans over and asks the apostle, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and where have they come from?" It's a good question; one that John is unable to answer. He doesn't know. But he has a hunch the elder does. So he replies, "Sir, you know." Indeed he does. He tells John, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

We call them the saints – the saints in glory. They are those whom we remember and for whom we give thanks to God on this the Feast of All Saints. But who are they really? What is it that qualifies someone for sainthood? Why is it that some people like Peter, Paul, Mary, Luke, Augustine, and Martin of Tours earn that title and others don't? Who's ever heard of a St. Russell or a St. Tiffany? Not me, and I doubt that you have either. So, what makes a person a saint? That's a question I'd like to explore this morning, because there's a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about it.

And this is due in no small part to the strong influence that the Roman Catholic Church has on Christian thinking. It makes sense: over half of the world's Christians are Roman Catholic. And even though we in the Lutheran and Protestant traditions aren't involved, we are aware that it's a pretty big deal when someone is officially declared a saint by the Church of Rome. We know it's an involved process, one that usually takes a long time. You may be aware that it was only a few weeks ago during his visit to the United States that Pope Francis announced that Father Junipero Serra, a priest who founded several of the missions on the California coast way back when, was finally going to be elevated to sainthood. And he's been dead for over 230 years. You're probably also aware that people like Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II are said to be on the fast track for being declared saints. So what's that all about?

I'd like to explain; but before I do, I need to say that I'm not doing this to bash Catholics and their way of understanding this. I'm doing it because whether we like it or not, much of their thinking tends to bleed over into ours – again, because of the strong influence they have on the world's overall perception of Christianity and what it teaches. Okay?

Okay. To be declared a saint in the Roman Church three criteria have to be established. First, you have to be dead. With the notable exception of Mary, the mother of our Lord, who qualified for sainthood even from birth, everyone else who's been named a saint has passed on. This is by far the easiest criterion to establish. Not breathing, heart not beating; yup: he's dead.

Second, the candidate for sainthood has to have at least two verified postmortem miracles accredited to them. Yes, that's right: miracles performed after their deaths. How does that work? Well, we don't get into the whole praying to the saints thing. There's no biblical basis for it, and Jesus taught us to pray directly to the Father in his name. But praying to departed saints is quite common in Catholicism. The idea is to ask for their intercession on your behalf. It's like the Lord is more likely to answer their prayers than yours because being holy and all, they've got greater pull with him than you do. So you pray to the saints to get them on your side. Okay, it happens that sometimes, for reasons I don't quite understand, people pray to departed individuals that they think may later be named saints. It seems to me that if you really wanted your prayer answered you'd go to an already firmly established saint. But whatever. Some people do this. And then if their prayer is answered in a favorable way – and it has to be something truly miraculous – then that's taken as evidence that the person who was prayed to is indeed a saint.

This, as you might guess, is a lot harder to prove. For example, when Mother Teresa passed away not too long ago, reports of miracles resulting from people praying to her immediately began to circulate. I recall reading one about a woman who said she was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Had a tumor the size of a grapefruit in her head. She prayed to Mother Teresa, goes to the doctor again, and poof – it's gone. No tumor. No sign of cancer. Sounds like a miracle. Ah, but it has to be investigated. Was this woman really diagnosed with cancer? And even if she was, was it a mistake of some kind? Maybe the doctor was looking at someone else's x-ray. And is she really healed? And if she is, is there another explanation for it? And what about her prayers? Were they exclusively to Mother Teresa, or did she also pray to other saints who might be responsible for the cure? Or here's a thought: maybe she prayed directly to the Lord at some point, or somebody else prayed for her. So, can we be sure it was actually Mother Teresa's intercession that got the job done? It's awfully hard to prove all of this – that we've got a genuine miracle that can be credited to the saint. And you have to have at least two of them. Needless to say, the vast majority of the reported claims of miracles turn out to be dead ends.

Okay, if coming up with two confirmed miracles is a high hurdle, it's even tougher to clear the third. This involves a thorough investigation of the life, writings, and legacy of the saint candidate. No stone is left unturned. Testimony from witnesses and experts, physical evidence, and the entire life of the person is examined with fine detail. Every skeleton in the closet is taken out. All dirty laundry looked at. And what must be shown is that there is evidence of the candidate having led an exemplary life of goodness and virtue worthy of imitation. Forever helpful, patient, kind, eager to serve; never an angry word or selfish thought; endless hours devoted to prayer and sacred meditation. It helps also if they died a heroic death for confessing the faith (martyrdom, that is), or if they'd undergone a major conversion of heart in which a previous immoral life was abandoned entirely and replaced by one of outstanding holiness and purity. Imagine how you would fare if such a thorough investigation were done of your life, and you'll have a pretty good idea how hard it is to meet this criterion. Mind you, we aren't talking exactly of sinless perfection here, but certainly the next closest thing to it.

Now, if indeed all three criteria are sufficiently satisfied, there's still a lot of red tape and tons of bureaucratic rigmarole to wade through; but when it's all done – all the i's dutifully dotted

and all the t's properly crossed – then the Pope, and only the Pope, can, at his discretion, officially declare the person a saint.

Not surprisingly, very few candidates make it. Yes, a small handful get there; but for the most part hardly anyone is named a saint. The bar is set too high; the club too exclusive. And that's a pity, because the result is that almost no one aspires to become a saint. I listen to Christian radio stations when I'm driving. On one of the Catholic channels there's a call-in talk show in which the two hosts are forever reminding folks who phone in that they aren't just called to faithfulness but to sainthood. The response they get from the callers is always the same: "Who, me? No way. I could never be a saint."

My concern is that too often we share that sentiment. We might not think of the requirements for attaining sainthood in exactly the same way that our brothers and sisters in the Roman Church do, but we still have the general sense that it's a goal beyond our reach. And because it's beyond me, why strive for it? No matter how hard I try, I could never be a saint.

Now, in one sense, that's absolutely correct; but in another, it's totally wrong. It's correct in this sense: no one ever through their own efforts to strive for holiness of life and purity of heart can attain the status of sainthood. No, everyone who comes into this world is conceived and born in sin. It's not just that we're spiritually and morally damaged; it's that we are totally corrupt, rotten through and through, perverse of heart, and darkened in understanding. And part of sin's corruption is the delusion is that we can do things that are good in the sight of God, things that are worthy of merit in his eyes. What that delusion is, is the deadly sin of pride. Thus in our efforts to do what we think will please God, we're actually adding that sin on top of what is already an offense to him. No one works their way to sainthood.

But before when I was describing the conditions under which the Roman Church grants sainthood to candidates it deems worthy, I hope you noticed a glaring omission. In all that discussion, I never said anything about Jesus. And don't blame me for that: I got the criteria from one of their websites. But now consider today's first reading: that glorious vision given to St. John of the saints assembled before God's throne. They aren't few in number. There's a vast multitude of them – too numerous to count. And they aren't standing there talking about what holy and virtuous lives they led. They are praising the Lord for their salvation. They are giving all glory and thanksgiving and honor to him and to the Lamb who took away their sins by suffering and dying on the cross. They stand before the Lord in robes of righteousness made white not by their noble achievements and hard work, but by the blood of the Lamb – the blood he shed for them. They didn't make themselves saints. God by his power, his love, his Word, and his Holy Spirit made them saints. And this didn't happen only upon their deaths. They were made saints by God's miraculous work on them in this life.

When? God made them saints when he baptized them. That's when he first washed away their sins, clothed them in Christ, and called them his own. And whether their lives here were comparatively short or long, God by his Word and Spirit kept them in spiritual humility, kept them ever aware of their sinfulness and their need for a Savior, kept them by his grace through faith in Jesus who alone is their righteousness and life.

What that means, dear friends, is that you don't have to aspire to sainthood. No. Rather you have already been made a saint – a holy one – by the work of God and his declaration. You are already Saint (name), Saint (name), Saint (name). It's not beyond your reach. It's been done. And now the task is not to work toward some unreachably high goal, but to simply be what God has already made you in Christ. You are to live according to your high calling –

again, not by your work but by God's continuing work in you. It is he who gives you the power and will to resist temptation and to do what is right and loving and good.

The elder asked John, "Who are these?" The answer is they are you. John's vision is of the finish line when all those who are in Christ will stand before the throne having completed their course of faith. The tribulations of this life will be over. Never again will we suffer want or need of any kind. And we will all together worship God and the Lamb ascribing all glory and honor to them. And the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be our shepherd. He will guide us to streams of living water. And God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Believe it. Be confident of it. And live in that great truth even now. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!