

SERMON on the Sunday of All Saints, June 23, 2019

“Saint” means holy, or filled with the Holy Spirit. Last Sunday we celebrated on Pentecost the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. Some people call this day the birth of the church. When the Christians received the gift of the Holy Spirit, their membership in the Church was complete. The next step, as our Lord tells us in the Gospel today, is to take up our cross and follow Him. The shema, the great prayer of Israel, is to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. It takes love to voluntarily take up a cross and to accept suffering. As parents, don’t we love our children so much that we willingly suffer on their account? If our marriage is as it should be, don’t we because of love willingly suffer for the sake of our husband or our wife? Suffering for the sake of love takes many forms. It could be putting the other first and denying our own wants and self-will. It could be following the commandments of God when the pleasures of life tempt us to walk a different path. When couples come to me for pre-marriage preparation, I try to explain to them that it is expedient for them to invite a third person into their lives and into their home: our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. If our home is a little church, and we center our lives on prayer, fasting, participating in the Holy Mysteries of the Church, then marriage and family life is the perfect vehicle for us to save our souls. Marriage gives us the perfect opportunity to show love to another, to serve another, and to reject our own self-will for the sake of another. That is why the relationship between God and the Church is so often described in Holy Scripture using the image of marriage, a Bridegroom and his Bride, our Savior and the Church.

We are all called to become saints. One way is to read the lives of the saints, these “cloud of witnesses,” and learn how they applied the Holy Gospel in a real and practical way in their lives. We can learn, then, how we can imitate the saints and apply the Gospel in our own lives as well. “To honor a saint is to imitate the life of the saint.” Perhaps we cannot do 1000 prostrations like St. Anthony the Great, but can’t we do 12 prostrations? Perhaps we cannot kneel on a rock and pray continuously for 1000 days like St. Seraphim of Sarov, but can’t we pray for 15 minutes in the morning and for 15 minutes in the evening? Perhaps we can’t go to Confession every day like the monastic saints who confessed their thoughts on a daily basis to their Elder, but can’t we go to Confession once a month? And if we can’t do that, can’t we go to Confession during every Fasting period? Perhaps we cannot give all of our lives to working for the church, but can’t we donate a few hours a month to help with the needs of the church?

In the early church it was not unusual to call all of the Christians saints. Showing love to our neighbor, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving shelter to the homeless, protecting and taking care of orphans, these deeds are what the Lord will ask us about on Judgement day. Based on how well we performed these deeds with the gifts that God has given us will determine our lot for eternity. Self-indulgence and the pleasures of life can give us some happiness, but it has even been scientifically proven that there is no greater happiness than when we do something for someone else. “It is better to give than to receive” the Lord teaches us. Isn’t it true that the people who have the greatest affect on us are the people who have shown us love and kindness?

Today we celebrate all the saints of the church. Only a fraction of the saints are known to us and commemorated on our Church calendar. Countless are the humble saints who served God and their fellow man secretly, and whose prayers and deeds are known only to God. May God help all of us to be part of the ranks of these holy ones, may we be numbered among the “cloud of witnesses,” and may we love God above all things and more than anything else in our life. Amen.