

Homily – All Saints’ Day (A)
Baptism of Milena Nicolina Di Iorio (Sabrina & Anthony)
November 1, 2014

Revelation 7:2-14 – Salvation: the gift of the Lamb, who creates and loves the world, and who blesses the “saints and martyrs.”
Psalm 24: “Who shall stand in God’s holy place? Those with clean hands, pure hearts, worthy desires.”

1 John 3:1-3 – Through grace, we are God’s children. Thus, we seek to live a life worthy of our identity and calling.

Matthew 5:1-12 – “Blessed/happy are the single-hearted, those whose lives are totally focused – on the Kingdom of God.”

Today and tomorrow, the Church celebrates the twin feasts of “All Saints” and “All Souls”. These are among the most ancient feasts in the Church calendar. As early as the 4th century, the Eastern Churches celebrated a solemn memorial of all martyrs, and by the 9th century, it was extended to the whole Church as a way of honouring **all** the saints. Martyrs and confessors, monks and mystics, clergy and laity, men and women, famous or obscure, named or anonymous – all those whose lives and deeds continue to inspire us, whose fidelity and holiness shine forth as examples of Christian life – all these are **saints**.

Tomorrow morning, at the 11 a.m. Mass, we will welcome the families and friends of our parishioners whose funerals took place here over the past twelve months. We will remember those whose names you have written in our “In Loving Memory” books. We will carry in our hearts those we love who at this time are sick or dying.

Today, however, is meant to be a celebration: All Saints Day!! When we think of the “saints”, we tend automatically to think of the heroes, the men and women “outstanding in holiness” who have been canonized by the church and are recognized as examples of faith and Christian love. Having just returned from a pilgrimage in the footsteps of St. Paul, I have had the privilege to visit those places associated with Paul and his many companions on the “mission to the Gentiles”: Barnabas and Silas, Luke and Timothy, Lydia and Priscilla and Aquila.

Yet, it was Paul himself who, in his many letters to those early Christian communities – at Philippi, and Thessalonica, and Ephesus, and Rome –

who referred not just to himself and his fellow apostles, but to the whole Christian community as “saints”. It is the insight echoed by St. John in today’s second reading, that we are already God’s children – and that when we see God face to face, our vocation to a love which is eternal will be revealed in perfect clarity. It is our belief that Milena Nicolina, will be baptized right here in a few minutes, will be enrolled in the communion of saints, her name written by Jesus in the Book of Life.

Vatican II took up this theme in what it calls the “universal call to holiness”. This call is addressed not only to “special holy people”, but to ALL the faithful. As Catholics, most of us can name some of the "famous men" (and women) of our past. Their names – Monica, Augustine, Francis, Teresa, Benedict, Ignatius, Joseph, Mary, Marguerite, Andre, Francois de Laval, Marie de l’Incarnation – are preserved in our churches and schools, our street and town names, in stained glass windows and statues, and in a hundred holy cards and medals. We praise them; but how well do we know them?

For most Catholics, saints are legendary people from the past: miracle workers, people of heroic faith, who now smile down on us from heaven. But what do such "perfect" men and women have to do with ordinary people like us? These "official" saints are named through a long investigation of their faith and virtues, a process that requires in the end the certification of at least one miracle. This formal process of "canonization" tends to emphasize the gap between holy people and the rest of us everyday believers. Sometimes, this complex process of formal naming of saints can block the realization of a crucial fact: that **all** Christians, not just a select few, are "called" to be saints.

One of my favourite books for spiritual reading is a book called *All Saints*, by Robert Ellsberg. For each day of the year, he highlights a particular figure, shows how their life concretely manifests one aspect or another of the universal call to holiness. Many of these figures are canonized saints. But he also offers us examples of lay Catholics – of Orthodox and Protestant believers – of advocates for justice – even of non-Christians– who lived Christian virtues and values in an exemplary and edifying way. We need heroes. We need people who can inspire us to greater generosity, courage, and love.

When the church says that all Christians are called to be saints, that Milena is numbered today among the saints, that her parents Anthony

and Sabrina, her godparents Daniel and Angela are called to holiness, it doesn't mean that each of us should be preparing for canonization!

It means that if we are followers of Christ, we are called to conform our hearts and minds to the pattern of his holiness. For most of us, this holiness is not going to be expressed in writing learned theological treatises, performing fantastic feats of asceticism, engaging in marathon prayer sessions, or walking on water. If we want to see the face of holiness, we can recognize it in the virtues Jesus enumerated in the Beatitudes from today's gospel: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers; the pure of heart, those who mourn, those who are willing to suffer for the sake of justice.*

Think: what saints do you know? Who has inspired you, who has embodied Christ-like virtues among those you have met: a teacher, a grandparent, a neighbour, a co-worker, a friend. It may be someone who stands out for her gentleness or forgiveness; someone who retains a spirit of joy in the midst of sorrows; someone who risks disapproval or looking foolish for taking an unpopular stand; someone whom we always count on to provide an example that is loving, brave, and true. Such people also represent the face of holiness in our time. It is not likely that they will be canonized. Churches will not be named in their honor. And yet they, too, are among the great parade of saints recognized on today's feast of All Saints.

Today's feast of All Saints provides us with an opportunity to remember all holy men and women of the past, **and** those who walk beside us today. Yes, the official canonized saints, the "famous" ones, but also those whose faith and deeds were only recognized by their friends and family, maybe even by God alone. We remember them not only to praise them but to remind ourselves of our own vocation to holiness. For each of us there is a path to holiness that lies within our own individual circumstances, that responds to the needs of our neighbors and our particular moment in history. The feast of All Saints strengthens and encourages us to create that path by walking it. So let us embrace the path of the Beatitudes. Let us embrace our vocation to be and to live as "children of God." Then we will be among those who live in hope of seeing God "face to face". Amen.