

Saints: Perfected In the Divine Life

The traditional churches of the West celebrate the Feast of All Saints on November 1; in the Orthodox Church, we celebrate the Synaxis of All Saints on the first Sunday after Pentecost. Christians from time immemorial have commemorated saints known to us and known only to God together on All Saints.

We are “called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7, I Co. 1:2). What does that calling mean? How do we walk it out in our daily lives? And what is a “saint”?

The word “saint” comes from the same root as the word “holy.” Saints are those called to be holy (I Pet. 1:15-16). God is holy (Lev. 11:22, I Pet. 1:16), and we are made in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26), formed according to the archetype of Christ (Heb. 1:3). Holiness is often understood as being “set apart to God” or “set apart for God.” I suggest that holiness is more than that. Holiness isn’t *something* we become; holy is *who* we become. It’s not something extrinsic to us that we attain; it must become who we are. We are holy, not by becoming something foreign to our nature, but by fully becoming who we were always meant to be.

Holiness is becoming by grace what Jesus is by nature, rising from the baptismal font in newness of the resurrection life of Christ (Rom. 6:3-7), partaking of the divine nature (II Pet. 1:4) as he is formed in us (Gal. 4:19) not as an abstraction but as a reality. By receiving the gratuitous outpouring of God’s energies (“grace”), and engaging with those energies all of our being (“faith”), we become all that he is. We do not become a divinity, a member of the Holy Trinity, but we do become “little Christs,” which is what it means to be a “Christian.” We are filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19), having Christ, who is the fullness of the godhead (Col. 2:9) formed in us (Gal. 4:19) and dwelling in us (Gal. 2:20).

The Orthodox Church teaches that this happens literally, by grace, and not just figuratively, allegorically, or juridically. It’s not that if we become holy, we are moved into a category of things that now belong or pertain to God. Rather, by being re-formed into the fullness of the person and nature of Christ who is fully God, we take on the nature of the God who is holy. We become filled with his life, so that we live that life in our human nature just as Jesus did. All that the Father is by nature, the Son is by nature; and all that the Son is by nature, we can become by grace, thereby becoming by grace what God is by nature. We can thus be holy, precisely because by receiving the gratuitous outpouring of his energies we take on the nature of the One who is holy.

Sainthood, then, is godhood, becoming the very light, life and love of God in the earth by grace. That sounds suspicious to some Christians. But this is not a syncretistic and heretical blending of truth and falsehood. The truth is that we can become divine, but we are not divine by nature, as the heretics claim. Rather, we become divine by grace. The falsehood is that we are divinities by nature; the truth is that we become partakers of the divine nature by grace.

The saints are those who took seriously the call to live the divine life in this life. They let nothing stand between them and the “one thing needful” (Lk. 10:42), fixing their eyes on Christ (Heb. 12:2) and running with endurance the race marked out for them (Heb. 12:1), persevering until the end, that they might be saved (Matt. 24:13).

The saints weren't saints until they were saints. The saints didn't walk around on a cushion of air, their feet not touching the ground. They didn't – at least, most of them didn't – exude a special aroma or act spooky or weird. They just took their faith very seriously, like it was the only thing that really mattered. Everything else was either a means to faith and embraced, or a hindrance to faith and eschewed. And they were right.

When pastors hold up saints as an example of the Christian life, people often object, “but they were SAINTS,” seeming to believe that saints had an unfair advantage over the rest of us ordinary people. Not so. Saints didn't start as saints with an easy road to holiness; they chose to be holy and became saints. They made a choice, the same choice that we can make, if we want it badly enough. How badly do we want to fulfill our calling?

Some saints are saints because of one event at the end of their lives, when for the first time they saw clearly the glory of God in the face of Christ's martyrs and embraced martyrdom for themselves. They were perfected in the divine life in an instant. Other saints persevered in the marathon of the Christian life over their entire lifetime. They show us what it means to “run with perseverance” or endurance. They were perfected in the divine life throughout their lives.

Classically, there are six categories of saints: apostles and equals-to-the-apostles, who dedicated their lives to the spreading of the Gospel; martyrs and confessors who died for the faith or made extreme sacrifices rather than deny, obscure, or compromise the faith; prophets of the Old Testament and the prophet, forerunner and baptizer John who prepared the people of God to receive their salvation in Christ; bishops and priests who served the churches well; monastics who withdrew from the world to embrace communion with God as their one aim; and “the righteous” who lived holy lives in the world.

Any of us could be described in any of these categories, but the last gives me hope for myself. I am a priest and pastor, a husband and father, and I work a “secular” job in the world. I am encouraged at the example of the righteous such as St. Juliana of Lazarevo, who was married and ran a large household, raised seven children, and set an example of the Christian life; and St. Emilia, who raised ten children, five of whom were numbered among the saints.

My family obligations and workaday life are no excuse. I am called to the same calling. I, too, am called to be a saint, to be holy as God is holy, to be his life, light and love in the world. I'm not called to be spooky and weird; I'm called to be truly normal, living life according to the “norm,” the archetype Christ, who showed us what it means to be fully human.

The life of the saints isn't remarkable; it's ordinary. It's the way we're all supposed to live. The reason it strikes us as different is that we are messed up. What the Church offers us, among many blessings, is the opportunity to get cleaned up, reoriented, and energized with the life of Christ so that we can live his life in the world. For we are “called to be saints.”