

“The Principle of Martyrdom as the Key to True Happiness”
Homily for the Solemnity of All Saints
November 1, 2020; St. Mary’s Cathedral

Introduction

It is a happy occurrence of the calendar this year that November 1 falls on a Sunday. And so we can celebrate All Saints Day on the Lord’s Day; the Solemnity of All Saints is of the highest degree of solemnity in the calendar of the Church, and so it takes precedence over the Sunday Mass in Ordinary Time. So it is a doubly happy occasion that we can come together to worship today, and I especially want to welcome our visitors to our Cathedral today. We are very happy you have joined us as we gradually return to indoor worship, continuing to observe the safety measures we must in order to do our part to curb the spread of the virus.

Growing Categories of Saints

This Solemnity of All Saints is, as usual in the Church, of ancient origin. From the earliest times in the Church, there was a feast day to commemorate all the martyrs. Originally, very early on, the martyrs were the ones who were considered to be the saints. We have an allusion to this in our first reading for Mass today, this passage from the Book of Revelation. St. John has this vision, as he describes it, of “a great multitude . . . from every nation, race, people, and tongue,” and then he asks who they are, and he hears, “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.” These were the early martyrs, especially in Rome where there was such a fierce persecution.

We can see how the Church of Rome recognized these martyrs in other ways. For example, in the year 609, a church was dedicated in honor of “Our Lady and All Martyrs.” We know it by another name – it’s the “Pantheon.” The Pantheon had been a pagan temple dedicated to all the pagan Roman gods, so it’s a very ancient building. It was a temple to all the gods – that’s why it was called “pan-theon” – “all the gods.” Now, the Pantheon honors those who gave their lives because they refused to worship those false pagan gods in order to be faithful to the worship of the one, true God. It was some time after this dedication that a special feast day developed to honor all of the saints, not just martyrs. What happened was, especially after the time of persecution, new categories of saints emerged. Those who were not martyrs were called “confessors” because of confessing the faith.

Initially, those who were recognized for this degree of sanctity were those who sought Christ in the desert, in the solitude of the desert. This began even before the end of the persecution, beginning in the desert in Egypt. They withdrew there in solitude to seek the Lord, and from these developed the orders of monks and virgins, more categories of saints. These were the ones who were considered to be the “white martyrs,” not the “red martyrs,” the literal martyrs, who shed their blood, but “white martyrs” because they died to all things of this world, all worldly pursuits, all worldly desires.

Eventually, these monastic communities began to exercise works of mercy and charity, and so still more categories of saints emerged: educators, scholars, missionaries, then even beyond the ranks of the monasteries, even civil authorities – emperors and people of nobility – whom the Church has recognized as saints because they lived an austere and devout life and had a special care for the poor. They understood their role of civil governing authority to care for the most vulnerable. Some of them even renounced their worldly power not only to serve the poor

but to become poor with the poor in order to dedicate their lives to the poor. Widows, too, have always had a special place in service to the Christian community, even going back to Biblical times.

So, the understanding grew that all walks of life, all vocations, are a means to sanctity. That's why God gives us a vocation, and even the work we do in our professions is a means to our sanctity. Widowhood, the married state, parenthood, consecrated religious life, priests, popes, and, yes, believe it or not, even some bishops have been canonized saints!

Rebuilding Civilization: The Christian World View

This is how the Church rebuilt civilization after the fall of the Roman Empire. The Church rebuilt civilization, but she rebuilt it in a Christian way, such that, it is no exaggeration to say that every good thing we have can eventually be traced back to what the Church either gave us or preserved from antiquity and improved upon, as it was re-building a flourishing Christian civilization. Now that might seem like a wild claim, but I would say that if you trace it back far enough, even our technology, our social media, is possible because of advances in scientific research. It was those monks who began doing scientific research. They figured out the scientific method of inquiry, and then that began to flourish even more when the Church started establishing universities, something else, another good thing, the Church has given to the world – universities. And then there are hospitals, the concept of human rights and of international law, not to mention the more obvious ones with innovations in art, music, architecture, even our modern Western music theory and the way music is noted goes back to innovations the Church made with chant and the notation of Gregorian chant.

This is a world imbued with a Christian ethos where all activity, all vocations, all states of life, all work is for the means of one's sanctification. But the reference point is always that principle of martyrdom – death to self for sake of others. It is living for one's self only or primarily that gets one stuck in a rut of at best mediocrity and, actually, can end up being harmful to one's self and others. But that principle of martyrdom, dying to self for the sake of giving to others, these are the ones who “survive the great time of distress.”

St. John was speaking about the persecution of the Church in his time, and also in every era of the Church's history, there has been persecution. This “surviving the time of great distress,” applied to us, has two senses. There is the interior sense, the distress of temptations, the pull we feel to fall into sin and selfishness, even more so, those who are dealing with anxieties and addictions and these sorts of things – these are the interior distresses. But then there are also the exterior distresses, those that come from the outside, the pressure we sometimes feel to violate the principles of our faith, to violate doing the right thing.

But by surviving this time of great distress, by strengthening our spiritual muscle with prayer and worship and fasting and service, this is how we survive it and so attain the life of beatitude. And so on All Saints Day, we always hear this same gospel, the Beatitudes, Our Lord's beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of St. Matthew. He proclaims these Beatitudes. We read them today because these Beatitudes are the hallmarks of holiness. They are called “Beatitudes” because “beatitude” simply means “happiness.” *Beatus* in Latin means “happy,” so a life of beatitude is a life of happiness, but not in that fleeting superficial sense; it's the true, deep, and lasting sense, that sense that one is at peace with God and with one's conscience.

The Last Beatitude

In this sense, we can say that, then, the last Beatitude is the reference point for all the others, if we go back to that principle of martyrdom. That last Beatitude is the reference point. That last Beatitude, if you listen to it, is unique in comparison with the others.

First of all, unlike the others, there are conditions to it. All the others are just plain statements without any conditions. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven,” “Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.” But do you notice here there are two conditions? Our Lord says, “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you *falsely because of me.*” Those are the two conditions. “Utter evil against you *falsely*” – not for a valid reason, right? If you do something insulting and then are insulted in return, that doesn’t count; that doesn’t lead to beatitude. And then He says, “*Because of me.*” Everyone in life has to suffer; everyone endures harsh treatments in some way or another at some time or another, but it’s not any kind whatsoever – it is specifically what we suffer for the sake of Christ that brings us beatitude if we survive the time of distress. This, again, is the principle of martyrdom.

Now, there is one more thing that makes this Beatitude unique. Did you notice how Our Lord switches to the second person in this Beatitude? All of the others are in the third person - “Blessed are they.” Here, he makes it very personal: “Blessed are *you.*” It makes it much more personal, as if He is saying, “And what about you? Will you betray me like Judas? Or will you be like the great multitude of my followers from every nation, race, people, and tongue, who did not bow down in homage to false gods, but washed themselves clean in my blood that I poured out for them, and even poured out their blood for me, and so survived the time of great distress by not wavering in their worship of me, their only true God, Creator, Lord and Savior?”

The Period of Great Distress

This, my friends, is the question of the moment for us because we have now entered into another period of great distress. I don’t say we are “about to enter” or “are entering.” We *have already entered* into a period of great distress, as we see the dismantling of Western Civilization all around us. This is something that has actually been going on for a very long time, but we see it now with an unmitigated vehemence, even literally dismantling Western civilization with the toppling of statues, which has been going on in our Archdiocese and has been going on throughout the country. We see Church property being vandalized, entered into for the purpose of toppling and defacing statues of our Blessed Mother, let alone our wonderful saints such as St. Junipero Serra. Our own Mission Dolores is an example of the vandalism of Church property. So even literally, in addition to figuratively speaking, with the sense of rewriting history with a false narrative and “cancelling” out the parts of history that these protagonists would find embarrassing to their cause.

We are now witnessing a sort of return to worship of pagan gods, pagan gods of a different kind – self-indulgence, greed, pleasure; above all, power. The ancient pagan civilization collapsed, the Church re-built it in a Christian way, and now we see it being dismantled and being replaced by a kind of pagan culture. But to do this, they have to cancel Western Civilization – we even hear that phrase, the “cancel culture” – because that is how they cancel the Church. This Western civilization is the Church’s beautiful gift to the world, the Church giving the world so much truth, beauty, and goodness. And so the Church is inextricably identified with the civilization she built. Therefore, they have to vilify it in order to destroy and attempt to cancel out the Church as their path to power.

Preserving the right to practice faith in the public square, robust religious liberty and the life of the Church, this is what protects a society against tyranny. The time of great distress is now upon us, when the true disciples will be separated out from the impostors.

Conclusion

How abundant God is in His mercy, to give us such ample opportunity for holiness, which is to say ample opportunity for happiness! Holiness is the life of beatitude; beatitude means that happiness which is true, deep, and lasting. This is a time to thank our Lord for this opportunity to show Him our love and fidelity in such an obvious way – so many opportunities – and thereby to attain spiritual excellence, the life of true beatitude. This is the time to ponder seriously the question our Lord is asking each one of us right now: “And what about you?”