

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The Feast of All Saints follows our Reformation remembrances. It makes sense. Luther nailed the 95 theses to the Castle Church door on the Eve of All Saints. Luther was concerned about abuses and was starting to think reform ... of the Western Church with its center in Rome.

This past week I was sent a link to a YouTube video and watched it. The Ten Minute Bible Hour man — his name is Matt, and he is a reformed pastor, I think— visited an LCMS church, showing the architecture and appointments and talking with the pastor about the theology in them. He'll have a second video where he'll talk to the pastor and ask specific theological questions, but he concluded this video saying, "That looked like a reformed catholic church." He might say the same thing about Zion, about her sacred space, and perhaps also her worship.

He might especially wonder on a day like today. "What are they doing? All Saints Day?" Some Lutherans think similarly. "That just seems so catholic." And indeed we are. We take care to preach here the "faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all" (Vincent of Lérin, d. c. 445); or as Jude puts it, we "*contend for*"—we believe it, teach it, confess it—"*the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude 3).

We confess it, and today we celebrate it because we believe in the church. "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints" We just prayed it: this Church is God's "faithful people of all times and places" who have been "knit together" "into one holy communion." The Church is One, and she is holy, for she is "the mystical body of [God's] Son, Jesus Christ."

That's why we are celebrating today. We do it in commemoration of the holy ones, those consecrated by God in the waters of Holy Baptism, set apart and joined to Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:13), brought into His kingdom by His grace. It's not that Christ died only for these — no, His propitiatory sacrifice was for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). But these holy ones make up the Church. These holy ones acknowledge that sacrifice and confess it and sing of it. And they worship the spotless Lamb pierced for our transgressions (Is. 53:5), slain but living (Rev. 5:6), the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). The holy ones are the Church that partakes of His gracious body and blood offered up for us, that we might be strengthened in our faith, that we might endure in the faith unto death (Matt. 10:22).

On this All Saints Day, we join with the whole church in heaven and on earth in praise of Christ: "*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*" But we do so thinking on the saints of days past.

Of course, we are Lutheran, and so, as you have already heard, as we on earth “*run with endurance the race that is set before us*” (Heb. 12:1), we look “*to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*” (Heb. 12:2). We praise Jesus and His cross.

But we also confess that “*we are surrounded by [a great] cloud of witnesses*”: Old Testament saints Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, and more; New Testament saints Mary and Joseph, Peter, James, John, and the other disciples, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, James and Jude —men and women of faith.

But these notable saints of the Bible, and early Church fathers, and others who have been canonized by the Pope, are not the only saints that we remember, but those nearer saints, our loved ones who still “rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light,” those saints gathered in “that multitude which no man can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom we forevermore are one,” as we pray on Christmas Eve.

We remember them, we confess in the Augsburg Confession, “so that we may follow the example of their faith and good works, according to our calling” (AC, XXI:1), but not to “call on the saints or to ask the saints for help.” The latter was the practice of Rome, which we reject. Rome instructs its people to pray the rosary calling upon the Blessed Virgin Mary. Roman Catholics wear their St. Christopher medals, praying to him for safe travel. They bury their St. Joseph statues in their yards, praying that their house will sell quickly.

If you ask a Roman Catholic about it, they’ll often respond, “We don’t pray to the saint; we just ask for their prayers.” But the Roman Catholic response to the Augsburg Confession betrays something different. They write, “[the Lutherans] admit ... that the saints are not to be called upon for help. ... This article of their confession ... must be condemned” (The Confutation of the Augsburg Confession, Article Twenty-One). Moreover, their own catechism says of Mary, “When we pray to her ...,” and again, “We can pray with and to her” (Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 2679). And regarding other saints, “We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world” (CCC, 2683).

Lutherans, on the other hand, confess: “Scripture sets before us the one Christ as the Mediator, Atoning Sacrifice, High Priest, and Intercessor [1 Timothy 2:5–6]. He [along with the Father and the Spirit] is to be prayed to,” not saints or angels. And only His intercession comes with the promise to “hear our prayer [John 14:13]” (AC, XXI:2-3).

Rather than praying to the saints, we Lutherans honor those who have gone before us: we “thank God [for them] because He has shown examples of mercy, because He wishes to save people, and because He has given teachers and other gifts to the Church.” We honor them because their example under trial and persecution strengthens “our faith. When we see Peter’s denial forgiven,” for example, “we also are encouraged to believe all the more that grace truly superabounds over sin (Romans 5:20).” Thirdly, we honor them by way of “imitation, first of faith, then of the other virtues,” like virtuous and godly living (Apology, XXI:4-6).

We honor them, and we rejoice with them, for we are one with them in Christ, and with them, who now rest from their labors (Rev. 14:13), we are blessed in Him, though we still feebly struggle in this life. We are blessed in Christ, for joined to Him, we participate in His poverty of spirit—remember, He became poor for our sake (2 Cor. 8:9)—and so, we are promised the kingdom of heaven.

We are blessed in Christ. We mourn our sin, but are comforted that by His death, He has destroyed the power of death (Heb. 2:14), and by faith in His cross and resurrection, we are forgiven, reckoned righteous, holy. We are blessed in Christ, who meekly went to cross and death. And by baptism, we are not only united with Christ in His death, but we are also promised a resurrection (Rom. 6:3, 5) and life everlasting in a new heavens and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:13).

In Christ, we who hunger and thirst for righteousness are served His body broken and His blood poured out. We’re forgiven, and we’re satisfied. Being in Christ, His mercy to us flows through us. Baptized into Christ, we are given a new and pure heart (Ez. 36:25-26). Commissioned by Christ, we proclaim peace (Luke 10:5). And we are blessed.

Even in persecution, which is sure to come for being in Christ, we are blessed as we endure in Him, for we will be accounted in heaven among those persecuted before us, among those “*coming out of the great tribulation,*” who “*have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*”

Therefore, Jesus can say, “*rejoice and be glad*” even now, for you are blessed of God in Christ Jesus. You have a reward awaiting in heaven. Rejoice and be glad for the faithful who have gone before you, who have blazed a trail for you to follow through the travails of life. Rejoice and be glad, you blessed, you holy ones through faith, you saints, for Christ will come again in glory, and on that day you will receive the fullness of Your blessing prepared for you from the foundation of the earth.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.