

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today is All Saints Day, a feast of the Church, in which we honor those faithful Christians who have passed through death to life to await in the eternal presence of the Triune God their resurrection from the dead and their blessed inheritance. It is right to do this. As the Father honors those who followed Jesus and served Him, so ought we honor them (John 12:26).

The celebration is always touching as shortly we will read the names of those saints of Zion who have been carried by the angels to Abram's bosom. We remember them fondly when they were among us; we honor them now as they have departed from us to be with the Lord. But this year is yet more touching for me, as I remember my own mother who was called to the Lord's side. Perhaps the same is true for you ... you have experienced the death of a faithful loved one. We are assured as we remember them as those whose holiness comes not from their good works, but from their steadfast faith in Christ Jesus.

All of these saints have joined the *“great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”*

Here pictured is the communion of saints in the Holy Christian Church triumphant. But before we get to the explanation of the great multitude, John sees other saints, angels, including *“the four living creatures”* that are described elsewhere in Revelation as having six wings, who like the seraphim in Isaiah ceaselessly sing, *“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,”* but here more words of their constant refrain are revealed: *“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”*

That's how the first stanza of our Alleluia hymn begins. It lists the angels with their various ranks first in the list of saints. And rightly are the angels called saints, for Scripture calls them *“holy ones”* (Jude 14) and *“holy angels”* (Mark 8:38). The good angels are confirmed in their holiness; they are saints. Thus, we at least name Michael as St. Michael, and we could call Gabriel saint, too.

The second stanza of that Alleluia hymn speaks of the “bearer of the eternal Word.” The author here is speaking of the Blessed Virgin Mary and is exhorting her to add her voice to the refrain of alleluias. Rightly is she called a saint, along with her husband Joseph. Mary received God's incredible good news: you are going to bear a child who is the savior of the world, and it's all going to happen without the aid of a man ... and she believed it. Joseph, too, heard the incredible

news: Mary, your wife, is with child by the Holy Spirit. She will bear the Immanuel who will save His people from their sins, and Joseph believed and took Mary as his wife. Saints Mary and Joseph, indeed.

The third stanza speaks of the “souls in endless rest,” and of the “saints triumphant.” Here he speaks of the elders who are around the throne of God, perhaps the “patriarchs” of the twelve tribes along with the “holy Twelve” apostles. They — Matthew and John along with evangelists Mark and Luke — are called saints. Peter and Paul and the rest of the apostles are called saints. They were faithful in the face of fierce persecution.

“*Who are these who are clothed in white robes?*” asked one of the elders. They are not merely those who have been canonized by the Church. Surely, it’s the apostles and evangelists, as we’ve already mentioned. Surely, it’s the patriarchs and prophets, too. Surely, it’s Mary and Joseph. But it is also the orthodox fathers of the Church who are called saints: Polycarp of Smyrna, Athanasius of Alexandria, the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine, Chrysostom, and so forth.

All of these saints are listed in the *Lutheran Service Book* under “Feasts and Festivals” or “Commemorations.” Some are listed with the honorific “St.” before their names; others without it. But they’re all still listed there as saints to be honored, yet not honored “for their own sake, but as examples of those in whom the saving work of Jesus Christ has been made manifest to the glory of His holy name and to the praise of His grace and mercy” (LSB, “Commemorations”).

But this enumeration doesn’t yet sound like that “*great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.*” It’s a far cry from the “[a]ll saints triumphant” whose names we may not know. I daresay that these unsung saints have been more influential in our lives.

The story of the Martyrdom of Polycarp, for example, is inspiring! Do you know the story? Polycarp, a bishop in Smyrna of Asia Minor, lived during a great persecution of Christians. As he was arrested, his captors tried to get Polycarp to repent of his faith and worship Caesar. He would not. Polycarp was brought into the arena and there again urged to deny Christ. “Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent, and say, ‘Away with the Atheists.’” But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand towards them, while with groans he looked up to heaven, said, ‘Away with the Atheists.’ Then, the proconsul urging him, and saying, ‘Swear, and I will set you at liberty, reproach Christ’; Polycarp declared, ‘Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?’” ([NewAdvent.org](http://NewAdvent.org), “The Martyrdom of Polycarp”).

They proceeded to execute him, and they burned him, but they never got him to

recant! How inspiring!

Or you know the story of Martin Luther — we don't do it, but we could call him St. Martin, though he was named for another St. Martin. You know the story of Luther before the Emperor and princes at the Diet of Worms. They wanted him to recant of his writing and preaching. He responded: "I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen" (*Luther's Works*, 32:112–13). Luther lived the rest of his life under a threat of death, but remained faithful. This, too, is inspiring.

On the other hand, as inspiring as such accounts are, as impressive as these saints are, I can honestly say that St. Polycarp did not bring me to the font of rebirth by the Holy Spirit, to have my sins washed away, to be united with Christ. My sainted mother and dad did. I can definitely say that St. Martin Luther did not bring me to church or take me to catechism classes to prepare me for the Holy Sacrament. My sainted mother and dad did; my mother did. St. Augustine did not gather with us around the table to pray; St. John Chrysostom did not say prayers with me and my brothers as we went to bed. My mother did that with us, too, and none of these things will ever be chronicled in Butler's *Lives of the Saints*, but all of them were much more meaningful in my life of faith than all those recorded acts of courage. I'll bet it's true for you, too.

And no one will record the hymns I sang to my mother as she prepared to be carried to her Lord. St. Paul Gerhardt wasn't there singing; I was ... using many of his hymns, to be sure. I did it out of love of my mother and thanksgiving to God for what my sainted mother did for me in nurturing faith in my Lord Jesus Christ. I did it to buttress her faith, that she might endure to the end and be saved, and that in her example of endurance it would give me strength for my own faith. I did it in imitation of my mother who would sing hymns at home — though I must admit that my own taste in hymns is much different than my mother's.

Indeed, this is what we confess with regard to the saints: "Our Confession approves honoring the saints in three ways. The first is thanksgiving. We should thank God because He has shown examples of mercy ... The second service is the strengthening of our faith. ... The third honor is the imitation, first of faith, then of the other virtues" (Ap. XXI: 4-6), that one day we also, who are already saints, righteous through faith in Christ, yet still burdened with sin, might add our number to the great multitude, who have come out of the great tribulation no longer burdened by sin, who are with the Lord, that we might join in their heavenly hymn: "*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*"

For now, however, we honor them and we sing:

1. Oh, how blest are they whose toils are ended,  
Who through death have unto God ascended!  
They have arisen From the cares which keep us still in prison.

We honor them and we pray:

5. Come, O Christ, and loose the chains that bind us;  
Lead us forth and cast this world behind us.  
With You, the Anointed, Finds the soul its joy and rest appointed.  
In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.