

Solemnity of All Saints
(Apocalypse 7:2-4.9-14 / Matthew 5:1-12)
01.11.2021

Today we celebrate *All Saints*. We celebrate not just those saints whose names are recorded in the Church's Martyrology, the canonised saints and those whose memory is kept by whole Church communities – men, women and children around whom a cult has emerged in the Church, but *All Saints*. Today we recall with thanksgiving a countless host of what we might think of as *anonymous saints* – men, women and children who form that vast multitude drawn from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. Today we keep the memory of the *immense cloud of witnesses*, those whose lives are now hidden with Christ in God. Celebrating *All Saints* we consider people we have known and so many others who, while unknown to us, are known to God and loved by Him. Today we offer praise for all those who are held in the Father's heart for all eternity; all those who are completely caught up in the Spirit; all those who are one with Christ, fully alive in Him, sharing in God's glory.

I believe that this day should make us think not only of saints who have gone before us. I believe this day should also make us grateful for the saints we see all around us in the here and now of our lives; those people whose sanctity is manifest and who encourage us by the example of their holy lives.

Even more than that, I believe that today's celebration should make us think of our own call to holiness.

It is every disciple, every child of God, every human being, who is called to be holy: *holy as the Lord our God is holy*. The Church speaks eloquently in her teaching of *the universal call to holiness*. This was a key theme at the Second Vatican Council. The Council's teaching here is rooted in Sacred Scripture. St Paul reminds us that *we are all called to be saints*. The Apostle's words articulates what the Council refers to as *the universal call to holiness*.

A great Biblical scholar and prolific spiritual writer of past decades, the late Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, former Archbishop of Milan, who was greatly inspired by the Church's teaching formulated in the Vatican II Decree *Lumen Gentium* (*The Light of the Nations, The Light of all Peoples*), spoke and wrote eloquently about the importance for Christians of this age and generation (the importance for us as men, women and children *called to be saints*) to cultivate in today's world what he called *a culture of holiness*.

The Vatican II Decree *Lumen Gentium* declares: *All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of love*. Let's just retain for a moment the last part of that statement which emphasises *the perfection of love*. What is implied in the line we are considering is that to live a holy life is to live a loving life. Genuine holiness is made manifest in true love. The teaching of the Sacred Scriptures is that *God is holy* and that *God is love*. To be holy and to be loving are equivalents. To be a holy person (to be a saint) means striving to be a loving person and manifesting that by our whole way of being. As the Vatican II Decree just quoted puts it: *in any state or walk of life...* in other words, whoever we are, wherever we are, whatever we are. The monks of this abbey are called to be holy living our monastic life here in this valley of Kilbroney; others among us are called to be holy in their family homes, be that in Rostrevor or wherever else from whence they come. Aware of just some of those who pray with us through the webcam link, I think of some of these caught up in busy occupations in the cities of London, Belfast or Dublin; and others still who are housebound in various places. I think of yet others who are called to be

holy in their convents and Religious Houses, here in Ireland or elsewhere. In this abbey church this morning (con-celebrating this Eucharist with us) I think of Fr Brian who returns to his parish ministry in Gozo later today, feeling fortified by his oblation celebrated yesterday, comforted by the bond of spiritual communion which unites him all the more to Holy Cross Abbey.

Let me return to the thoughts of the late Cardinal Martini. At one point he writes: *It is this generation of holiness which the Council desires; a holiness which, so to speak, one can find in the streets, on the buses, in the subway, in the factory and office, in the family. It is a holiness which leads the Church to enter the reality of everyday life.*

When we give a little thought to it, would we not have to conclude that quite often the really holy people we have met and continually meet in life have been and are quiet, unassuming and gentle persons encountered along the way? Frequently there will have been nothing spectacular about them. Often they will be people whose discretion is such that one might hardly notice them. Truly holy people are not always great heroes; often they are simple, retiring, low-profile figures. I can still hear my late mother declare about various people who were significant figures in our family's life: *Look at them and learn from them. They are saints. People like them are real saints.* There will, of course, sometimes be some high profile people, truly heroic figures who are saints – people who exercise outstanding leadership roles, for example. But, very often real saints attract little or no attention. Usually they won't trumpet their Christianity by overt preaching, but their holiness will nonetheless transpire. It will radiate from within them. It will shine forth in the quality of their life.

As I speak this morning, I think of the English-French film actor, Michael Lonsdale. He was, at one and the same time, a high-profile person and a low-profile saint. One of the most beautiful little books on prayer I ever read was penned by him. Therein Michael Lonsdale spoke of how for him walking in the streets of Paris or riding on the bus throughout the city were occasions to live a deep prayer of communion with God and the world around him. This film actor quietly made his Christian faith the essential driving force in his life. A man of heart and spirit, marked by a rather timid temperament, he gradually learned to open his heart and let it speak. He did not preach religion, but his deep spirituality shone forth in his whole way of being. While few of us know people as famous as Michael Lonsdale, I suspect all of us have known and can point to men and women still alive who are just like him in that they are steeped in the Gospel of Jesus Christ; in that they are men and women from whom God's own life-giving Spirit emanates.

These saints will never make it into the Martyrology – the Church's official catalogue of canonised saints, but their sanctity is nonetheless a real gift to the Church. Indeed, I dare to say that it is all the more a gift to the Church! Pope Francis speaks of such people as *the saints who live next door to us.*

I believe that on this Solemnity we are invited to see and rejoice in the sanctity which is to be evidenced all around us in so many good people who inhabit our world. One of the calls and challenges of this Solemnity, one of its invitations to us, is to recognise, rejoice in and give thanks for the real holiness that we are given to witness in others.

Today's Solemnity should also awaken us afresh to our own call to holiness.

If only this day were to convince all of us that we can and should be saints, then it would have served its purpose.

What Cardinal Martini is saying when he speaks of the call addressed to us being to develop a *culture of holiness* is simply this: that we should be striving to respond to God's vocation to holiness which echoes throughout both Testaments of the Sacred Scriptures. *The development*

of a culture of holiness is really all about living in the spirit of the Beatitudes: that's to say living in a way that points to God and manifests the presence of His kingdom which breaks into life in this world to the extent that it comes about and is seen to take shape in our lives.

Reading the Beatitudes this morning, let us give thanks for the fact that we are all blessed. Let us give thanks to God for those who have blessed us, those through whom God's grace has come to us: our saints, the saints who have marked our lives, those who have influenced us for the good.

Finally, let us pray for the grace to grow in holiness ourselves.

If God calls us to be saints, we can rest assured that it is within our reach to become saints. The Lord never asks of any of us with is beyond our capabilities. Holiness is possible for us. Holiness is within our grasp... with the help of God's grace! It is not our work alone, but God's work within us. It is the Lord Himself who makes us holy.

No matter what we may have gotten wrong in the past, no matter how badly we may have messed up along life's way, no matter to what extent we may have faltered, fallen or failed... we can and should engage ourselves today to become holy and contribute to the *culture of holiness* which our world stands in need of.

As the late Cardinal Hume liked to remind his listeners who were tempted to lose hope that holiness was within their reach and sanctity a possibility for them: *Remember, every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.*

Amen!