



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, November 2, 2003

The Solemnity of All Saints

Solemn Eucharist

at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector

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WE WANT TO BE SAINTS!

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

One of the many wise things the great Socrates is credited with saying is that the unexamined life is not worth living. In other words, man is made to think and to choose; and if we go through life without having given the way we live some serious reflection, unthinking, slaves to fears and desires, we are not living fully human lives. We are wasting the precious time we have. The point is well made, and it is hard to see how we can be followers of Jesus Christ without taking it. Self-examination is at the heart of Christian formation and discipleship.

What do you find when you engage in self-examination? I do not mean the self-absorption of Narcissus; I mean taking stock of your life. Over my more than thirty years as a priest, I have sought spiritual counsel and made regular confession of my sins, as I have had the sacred trust of hearing the confessions of others and providing spiritual and pastoral counsel to them. If I were to summarize what I have heard over these thirty years from the people of God, the flock of Christ – as well as what I have said and confessed myself – I would say that, upon examination, we yearn to be saints.

Yes, we yearn to be saints, by which I mean we desire to be the men and women and children God made us to be. We look at ourselves, and we are, on the down side, sorry at the talents and gifts we have not used; the opportunities not taken; the time wasted on distractions. On the up side, our very sorrow still reveals that this is not all there is; that we can still rediscover our true selves; can still exercise such gifts; can still experience such graces. This is what holiness means. It means wholeness and fullness of life and still more; it means collaborating with God who made us the unique children of his that we are. When we strive this way, we express our yearning to be saints. To desire holiness, to want to be saints, is not yearning for something unreal; it is a deep yearning for Reality Itself. It is sin that is a distraction from this deep Reality.

All Saints Day is the great festival when we reflect on the whole company of God's people. Of course we do think of the great and famous ones in the Bible's and the Church's Hall of Fame: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Ruth, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Esther and Judith. The patriarchs and matriarchs, kings and judges, warriors, prophets, apostles; the martyrs, confessors of the faith, scholars, theologians and teachers of truth; mothers, fathers, children and simple servants, all of them,

great and small, heroes of faith leading up to the coming of Christ. Then at the center is our Lady Saint Mary, the very Mother of God our Savior, the one who said “Yes” to God and reversed the primeval “No” of Mother Eve. Then Jesus Christ’s heralds and his Church: Saints Peter and Paul, our own patron Saint Thomas, Saint Augustine, Saint Francis, Saint Teresa, King Louis, Brother Lawrence. Each one of them did what no one else in the world could do – he or she lived *his own particular life in his own time in his own circumstances*, lived for God, followed Christ, sometimes (even often) fell, always repented and tried again, tried because each one desired to live his or her life as the unique gift from God it is.

God the Holy Trinity has put an infinite three-fold stamp of priceless value upon us. First, he made us in his own image. Second, he redeemed us with his own blood. Third, he gave us the very breath of his own Spirit. That is what we children of God mean to him – his image, his life-blood, his breath! – and we are made and called to be, to exercise, and to experience that three-fold grace every day of our lives, to be his saints. When Paul and the other apostles address the churches in their New Testament letters as “the saints,” that is just what they mean. They mean everybody.

The saints we sing about today are the saints we ourselves are called to be and the company we mean to join. In the marvelous movie of two decades ago, *Chariots of Fire*, which tells the story of British Olympic runners who won one silver and two gold medals in the Olympic Games following World War I, the devout Scots long distance medalist Eric Liddell argues with his sister, who wants him to stop training and to join her as a missionary in China. At the pivotal moment, Liddell declares, “God made me fast; and when I run, I feel his pleasure!”

One of the glories of this Church is the reredos over the high altar. Consider the vision it gives us for the festival of All Saints. There they are – teachers, martyrs, virgins, little children (even infants), mothers and fathers, statesmen, scholars, monks. They are there not only as examples, but also as friends and prayer-advocates and intercessors in Christ. The altar, on which is consecrated the Body of Christ, also extends the fellowship of those we see depicted in stone in mystical communion. The altar rail is the meeting place between the saints here on earth, still struggling in the church militant, and the saints on the other side of death in the church expectant and triumphant in glory.

As we take part in this liturgy and receive our Holy Communion at the meeting place in the communion of saints, let us examine ourselves yet again. Let us trust our deep, old desires for grace. It is possible to turn again and to be rejuvenated in life, to be the little child who sees the Kingdom of God, to start afresh again. Whatever you were made to do, do it as your best for God, and feel his pleasure. Know that you bear his image, have the protection of his life-blood, and breathe his spirit. Go with God, and be the saint he knows you are and can be.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.