



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

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Sunday, November 5, 2006

The Solemnity of All Saints

Solemn Eucharist

at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17

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THE CHURCH'S HALL OF FAME

"Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?"

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

Many years ago I drove my son Matthew, who was an eighth grader, from Boston to Cooperstown, New York, to see the Baseball Hall of Fame. I had wanted to see it all my life, and now Matthew did too, so off we went. It was awesome. It gave me a vivid notion of what the Church means by the using the word, Saint, with a capital letter "S."

The Hall of Fame covers all the historical eras of baseball, each with different sets of skills that were especially necessary for winning at the time. It enshrines place-hitters, home run sluggers, base stealers, infielders, outfield throwers, long-distance starting pitchers, one inning relievers, pinch hitters, managers, owners, umpires, even sportswriters. It has ferocious competitors like Ty Cobb, gentlemen like Ernie Banks and characters like Yogi Berra. There is a catholicity to the Hall of Fame which includes all kinds of excellence, but which excludes those who were corrupted and who threatened the integrity of the sport, no matter how great they were on the field. One thinks of the tragedy of Shoeless Joe Jackson and the Chicago Black Sox scandal, or, more recently, Pete Rose and issues of gambling.

The Church's calendar of the capital "S" saints is very much like the Hall of Fame. It reflects the many different times and places of Christendom, when different kinds of sanctity were called for in different situations. Its days honor martyrs, evangelists and preachers; monks, nuns, chaste ascetics, mystics and hermits; artists, writers and musicians; parents and children, peasants, workers, artisans, teachers, scribes, scholars, clergy and professionals of all sorts; monarchs, statesmen, soldiers and princes of church and society; servants of the poor and warriors for justice; high and low, rich and poor in their stations. Each one incarnates Jesus Christ in a particular way and is a special source of grace and inspiration, a patron saint, to those of us who are in similar stations and callings.

When you examine the biographies of saints, you discover in the details of their lives two things. First, you find that they are very human, with weaknesses and frailties we all know very well. They were up against the same limitations of both nature and nurture that we have. Second, you see the ways in which the grace and power of God entered their lives, usually at the most

critical times and at the very point where they were most acutely feeling those very weaknesses and frailties, when they were afraid or in pain, and in the moment of trial relied (actually, clung) to the Lord for refuge and strength. These are the capital “S” Saints of the Church’s Hall of Fame, and there are saints who have no official memorial, which is one reason why we have a feast of All Saints. But there is another reason.

The New Testament applies the word, saint, to all of us. Saint Paul, when he wrote his letters to the various churches in the first century, called all the members, “the saints.” There were, for example, the “saints” in Corinth and Rome. Corinth and Rome were rich, powerful, proud, worldly, political, colorful, sexy, tempting and corrupting cities, like New York and Boston and Washington. The Churches of Rome and Corinth appeared to have problems not unlike those of the Eastern Seaboard of the Episcopal Church. They were full of characters like us. Yet the Apostle called them “the saints.”

When you and I were baptized, we were given all the grace that a Christian can be given. The Prayer Book baptism service prays that the child or adult baptized may “lead the rest of *his* life according to this beginning.” In other words, we spend the rest of our lives trying to live up to what we were made to be in baptism. That is, we were regenerated, reborn, and called to be saints.

To be a saint is not something strange or foreign. On the contrary, to be a saint is to be the very person God made us to be; to use the gifts God gave us to their full extent; to walk in peace and communion with God; to know the full freedom and strength of what it means to be a fully human being made in the image of God. To be a saint, even though we have fallen very far short of the glory of God in our sin, is to lay hold of the salvation, the redemption and new lease on life, that God has purchased for us through Jesus Christ; to lay claim to our adoption as children of God, members of Christ, and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. To be a saint, even as we are keenly aware of our weaknesses and frailties, is to walk by the Spirit, to open ourselves to his strength and holiness like a sail catching the wind; to know that the more yielded and surrendered we are to God’s will, the more we enjoy his power. This is the paradox of holiness that every saint knows, the paradox which Jesus spells out in every Beatitude in today’s Gospel.

That is what the capital “S” saints did, but it is just the same for all the saints, for every one of us. It is good to visit the Hall of Fame, to be inspired by the examples of the heroes of the faith, to rejoice in their fellowship, and be aided by their patronage and prayers. As we do so, let us take courage and run with patience the race that is set before us, so that, together with them we may receive the crown of glory that never fades away.

That is the vision seen by Saint John the Divine in his Revelation. First he sees the 144,000 of the tribes of Israel. [This is a symbolic number representing perfection and completeness according to the twelve tribes: 12 times 12 times 1000 equal the 144,000.] Then he sees the multitude so great it cannot be numbered from every tribe, people and language of the Gentiles. This is assembly of all the saints, to which you and I are called. The great ones in the Hall of Fame, past, present, and yet to come are there. So are those who have no memorial but who loved the Lord and tried to do his will. In the end, all those who sought after God and were open to his grace will be brought to perfection through Christ, the Lamb, who is the shepherd of them all. There will be reunions and introductions. There will be no more tears but joy unspeakable. The things which we have seen through a glass darkly will be bright and clear. Faith and hope will give way to sight and fulfillment. Love will be completely at home, because God, who is Love, will be all in all.

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