

### ***Who Are These, Clothed in White Robes ...?***

In the name of the Lamb who is also our Shepherd, dear friends in Christ: It was not a coincidence that Martin Luther chose to nail his 95 theses against the sale of indulgences to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg on the eve of All Saints in 1517. No, he chose “All Hallows Eve” because his protest was as much against the veneration (we’d say “worship”) of the saints as it was against selling indulgences. The two practices were closely related. Think of them as theological evil twins. They both had to do with reducing the amount of time you have to spend in Purgatory suffering for your unremitted sins before you could enter into heaven.

One way to do this was to venerate something officially recognized as a holy relic. What’s a relic? It could be almost anything: a piece of wood from the cross on which our Lord was crucified, a bit of straw from his manger, a strap from the sandals he wore. The really big and thought to be most powerful relics were things like the tip of the spear that pierced his side, a thorn from the crown they placed on his head, the shroud in which his body was wrapped for burial, and the most coveted relic of all: the Holy Grail, the cup our Lord used when he instituted the Lord’s Supper. Those were the big ones. But the vast majority of relics came from the saints, usually part of their physical body: a lock of the virgin Mother’s hair, the head of John the Baptist, a finger bone from St. Jerome, a tooth from St. Gregory, and so on ad infinitum. There were millions of such relics scattered throughout Europe – most of them of dubious authenticity at best; but that didn’t matter. The thought was that by simply being in the presence of such items and devoting your full attention and sense of holy awe to them, and perhaps offering a prayer to the saint to which they belonged, well, that was a pious act that earned merit in the sight of God and thereby cancelled some of the penalty that you owed in Purgatory.

It so happened that Luther’s prince, Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, owned a private collection of over 40,000 such relics. He paid a fortune for them. But, out of the kindness of his heart (and probably to do a good deed that would itself earn him some merit) each year on the Festival of All Saints and for several days thereafter he would open his collection to his subjects who could, for a fee, venerate the items one by one and thereby spare themselves hundreds, even thousands of years of agony in Purgatory.

That was one way to do it. The other was to purchase an indulgence. What’s an indulgence? The thought was this: most people when they die have a negative account balance. That is to say, they have more sins than merits to their credit. So they have to go to Purgatory to suffer for the shortfall, however long that is. But there is a special class of persons who lived exceptionally holy lives: the saints. These people, when they die, have a positive account balance – more merits than sins. They get to skip Purgatory and go directly to heaven. That’s great for them. Ah, but what becomes of the extra merits they earned but didn’t need? These, according the church, were placed in what’s called the Treasury of Merits – like a bank for excess good deeds. That’s great for you. You see, the church claimed to control this Treasury and that it could dispense to worthy souls merits as needed. That’s what an indulgence was. When you bought an indulgence what you were paying for were merits earned by saints who didn’t need them. Their surplus merits were applied to your account to get you out of Purgatory quicker.

Of course, since could you never knew what your account balance was, you had to assume you were always in debt. So the thinking person would do both: venerate relics when the opportunity arose *and* buy indulgences when they were offered for sale. Oh, and a added

benefit of indulgences was that you could buy them for your beloved dead relatives to get them out of Purgatory quicker. What a deal!

Okay, by all of this, two things should be clear: first that the sale of indulgences and the veneration of saints and their relics are really two sides of the same counterfeit coin. Neither has any basis in Scripture, and neither is helpful to earning you any benefit in the sight of God. And second, understanding Luther's Christ centered theology as you do that (with the Holy Scriptures) emphasizes salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus and his work of atonement alone, why both practices were to Luther abominations that obscure the pure Gospel and stink to high heaven.

So yes, it makes sense that Luther would attack both false teachings at once: the veneration of the relics of the saints and the notion that you could obtain some of their excess merits for a price – and specifically that he would do this on the eve of All Saints when “all the saints” were being recognized and extolled.

But the very idea of celebrating All Saints Day leads us to a number of other questions. What, for instance, makes a person a saint? Who is a saint? And who makes that determination? I mean, why does someone like St. Patrick of Ireland get the title “saint”, but not my great uncle John who was, I'm told, a really terrific, generous, and faithful guy?

As I indicated before, in the western Church's tradition, very few people qualify as saints. And the Church has a long, drawn out, very complicated process for making that determination and awarding the title to individuals who measure up. We don't need to go into that. Suffice it to say that it's all merit based; that is, it has little to do with a person's faith and trust in Christ and much to do with their record of good works.

Those who attend the Thursday morning Bible study will recognize this – they call it “the book”. And they recoil in dread whenever I pull it out. As you can see, it's seen better days. It's titled *The Lives of the Saints*; subtitle: *With Reflections for Every Day in the Year*. And sure enough, it has a saint to commemorate for each day. Published in 1887, it bears the imprimatur of the Roman Catholic Church, which means it's official and has the Church's blessing. What's in it? Fantastic tales of holy piety, patient suffering, of miracles performed and pagans converted by people who dedicated their whole bodies, souls, and minds to the service of God. These are people who earned salvation for themselves by lives virtually free of sin and overflowing with good works. What's most fascinating to me is that a cardinal virtue that all these saints share in common is humility. I'm left wondering, how is it we know so much about their private acts of piety and devotion since the saints themselves are the only ones who would know and they would be too humble to mention them to anyone. It doesn't quite compute, does it?

How very different is the scene that St. John describes for us in today's reading from his Revelation of Jesus. The beloved disciple finds himself ushered into a vast heavenly throne room where an immense multitude is gathered, people from every nation, tribe, and tongue. They are not a select few; they are uncountable in number. They wear white robes and wave palm branches as they worship their God and Savior. And listen to what they say: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits and the throne, and to the Lamb!” They aren't taking credit for anything. They're not shouting about what holy lives they led. They are giving all thanks and praise to God and to the Savior Jesus Christ.

The elder who is acting as John's guide asks him, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where did they come?” John answers in essence, “I was hoping that you would

tell me.” The elder explains, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” The point to made is that they aren’t standing there arrayed in their own righteousness. No, they’ve been washed, cleansed by the blood of Jesus, their sins though many taken away by his suffering and death.

Who are these? They are the faithful of all ages who made it through the “great tribulation”, that is, life in this world under the curse of sin and death. They remained faithful to the last, trusting in Jesus, his victory over death, and the salvation he gives as a gift. And now they have been crowned with life. They are past suffering. They are eternally sheltered by the presence of God in whom they experience endless joy. Never do they hunger or thirst; not that they have no appetites for food and drink, but rather that their needs are always satisfied. Jesus himself shepherds them to springs of living water and green pastures.

Who are these? They are the saints of God. They are those who have gone before us in the faith and those who are yet to come. John sees them all. And through his eyes, you can see yourself there too giving all thanks, honor, and glory to Jesus who redeemed you by his blood and made you a saint of God. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***