

**Sermon, 5 November 2006—All Saints  
“St John’s Sesquicentennial”**

Ecticus 44:1-10,13-14; Psalm 149; Rev 7:2-4,9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

It is such a wonderful honor for me to be part of your sesquicentennial celebration—and what better day to remember the history of this parish than the Feast of All Saints. Our time together is the deepest witness to each other of what the Communion of Saints is, so I want to speak briefly. And I am going to do something that many clergy do, but that few confess doing: I am going to use someone else’s sermon.

Many years ago, I was in Spain on All Saints’ Day, and I went to Mass at the cathedral in the town where I found myself. Of course, these buildings are rarely modern. They have survived centuries, expanding and shifting and shrinking like a living thing, until the building itself becomes a record of the history of the city where it finds itself. So there I was, sitting on a hard wooden bench, surrounded by stained and soaring pillars of stone, chipped and gilded shrines, and hundreds of little old ladies in black with rosaries and fans.

The priest started by saying how good it was to gather on All Saints’ Day in their cathedral, the building where for centuries their ancestors had come together, Sunday after Sunday, to praise God and to receive God’s gifts. “And some of these same people, who worshipped here as you do,” the priest said, “the church came to recognize as saints; we sit among their tombs today.” And he pointed out, on one side, the tomb of a son of that town who had gone to Japan as a Jesuit missionary and been martyred there, and on the other side, the tomb of the saint for whom the town is named.

Santo Domingo lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. He had believed himself called to become a priest, but could never learn to read and write, so the

monastic order to which he had attached himself dispatched him to menial chores. Now this town is on a river and on the great pilgrimage road to Compostela, the shrine of Saint James. Part of the work of this monastic order was the welcome and care of pilgrims, whom they fed and cured and ferried across the river. Domingo eventually petitioned his order to assign him to a hermitage stationed where the road met the river, so that he might help the pilgrims cross; and once he was there, he began to design a bridge. This illiterate man somehow understood enough physics and engineering and enough human motivation to leave behind a wide graceful stone bridge of several arches which has continued to serve all those people that reach the river to this day. “What he gave us,” the priest said, “has lasted—as all the true gifts of grace last over time, bearing more and more fruit.”

Then he went on to say that there are others, unrecognized by the larger church, who are remembered and imitated, though not venerated in the same way. “Their tombs also,” he said, “surround us, in this building, in our cemetery, even in graveyards far away from us, and we remember them and the good that they did. Their gifts are innumerable, some known to the community, some known only to individuals.”

This is true everywhere, of course, and also here in Saint Cloud. The quilt hanging before us today is an account of such saints, those who made the history of this place—not all of them kind or easy, perhaps, any more than the roughhewn friends of God in Scripture, but all of them invested in something greater than themselves, living for the sake of what they had not yet inherited, unable to shake off the call of God, however muffled. Some of our ancestors in this place were wise or wealthy, as today’s first reading has it, and are remembered for their foundational contributions. “But of others,” Sirach says, “there is no memory, though they also were godly.” Their

righteous deeds are not forgotten, because what they invested themselves in has remained and continues to provide for others to this day.

The Spanish priest went on to say that all of us live and move and have our being in these concentric circles of sanctity. At the outer rim of the widest circle, vast in time and space, we share admiration for many saints, named in Scripture or history, and give thanks to God for them. But as these circles become smaller, more localized, more immediate, closer to our own day and domicile, the recognition of saints is also reduced. We know some saints because they have been close to us, vehicles of God's grace to us, helping us become the best version of ourselves possible, doing nothing to impair or impede: members of our family, certain teachers or mentors or friends or colleagues. What we know about them is that they have always looked at us through the best in us and they have evoked that goodness in us; they have been the vehicles of God's grace, working with our Creator to bring to fulfillment the goodness of the creature. Some of them held us with a steady hand, and we can recall much thoughtful care and challenge; others brushed us lightly as a wing, and we are hardly aware of their impact until later, when something lingers and germinates and blesses us. Though we know how God has used them in our life, these people are often unknown to others, certainly unknown in the history and traditions of the Church. Are they any less a channel of God's grace?

"You also can be such saints for others," the Spanish priest said, "signs for them of God's presence, of God's forgiveness, of God's active involvement for good and for health and for salvation." Now all of us know, because of the effect on us, how this work of grace is achieved, what moves us to unfold towards the light of God. I know, as the recipient, what works and what doesn't, how God's grace is activated in me: never by compulsion,

though judgment is sometimes involved; never by indulgence, though compassion is sometimes involved; never by indifference, though detachment is always involved.

What is essential is to meet on a field larger than either of us can encompass alone, surrounded by a horizon larger than either of us can comprehend alone, but which locate and orient us both. We learn this first of all in families: family systems that become toxic are those that collude with each other to obtain comfort and oblivion, or that negotiate with each other to offset resentment and fear; family systems that become healthy are those that somehow see the distinctness and freedom of the other person, and that understand that only when they meet for the sake of something larger than themselves, only when they contribute together to something that sustains and surrounds them, can the individuals remain free and distinct.

Human life is a paradox: when I try to satisfy only my own desires and bend the world into my shape, I remain trapped; but when I surrender into service of the greater life in which I participate, then I find myself free. If you think this is not true, recall the tantrum of a child who can see nothing but what it wants—that little mirror in which we see our own more veiled resistance and insistence—and compare that with the happiness of the child who can consider what is offered and choose. That is clear enough. But compare that with the mysterious happiness that comes from knowing the other person well enough to offer them the choices that make them happy. There are no random acts of kindness, because to be truly kind, you must be aware of how other people long for goodness and be alert to the moment when you can help them reach for it. These are the saints: those who know the children of God well enough to offer them the choices that make them happy—and to know that, they must know God. Knowing God in this case

means two things: imitating God's intention and imitating God's method. God's intention in Creation is that what is good be fruitful and multiply; this is what we learn from the Book of Genesis. God's method in Incarnation is to increase the good by participating in it, hidden in its own circumstances; this is what we learn from the life of Jesus. The saints are those who live this way, who learn the disciplines of this art.

I must tell you that no one becomes a saint by accident. You will not become one by looking the other way. At some point, even in the sweetest and gentlest lives, there comes a day when it occurs to the rapacious ego to strap on its hunting gear, to hide a rival's jewel under its own cloak, or even simply to pull up the drawbridge of its sullen tower of silence, where it can endorse its own opinions in solitude while appearing to consent and even to welcome the opinions of others. What happens on that day, the fierce and ruthless taming of the ego, is what makes a saint. As Sirach says, "of them there is no memory," because that work is done in secret. The saints' goodness lies in this: they made no one else carry the burden of their virtue. As someone wiser and wittier than I said, "the difference between those in heaven and those in hell is that those in hell want their own happiness in other people's perfection, and those in heaven want their own perfection in other people's happiness."

At the end of his sermon, the Spanish priest said, "finally, in the mysterious grace of God, you will not know for whom you are a saint. You cannot know who is ready, by the Holy Spirit's work, to feel the touch of God's finger through you. So your life must be a wheel turning evenly, smoothly, consistently, some day, God willing, even effortlessly." Those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the poor in spirit would hardly think themselves blessed; but it is how they abide in those

circumstances that causes others to see God act in them and glorify their Father in Heaven. The merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted for righteousness' sake cannot act out of self-regard, but only through a kind of self-forgetting. I am not making peace when I am getting my way, even for your own good; I am not being merciful when I am keeping track of how many times I forgive you and help you. The true saints of Saint John's in Saint Cloud are those that would be surprised to find themselves recalled on this quilt. Just as the sheep placed at the judge's right hand in the parable have no idea that Christ was the hungry person they fed, the stranger they welcomed, the prisoner they visited, so they have no idea that in giving the thirsty drink, in clothing the naked, in visiting the sick, it was as Christ that they did these things. We recognize this benevolent self-forgetting as love.

So today, as our Prayerbook puts it, let us continue to ask God to "give us the grace to follow the blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living," those known to the larger church, those known to this church in the heartland, those known to us alone, and aspiring towards the goodness we do not yet know, so that we can join them in the praise of the One who made us to rejoice for ever in that goodness, the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, whom we praise this day and hope to praise forever.