

Sermon for the Sunday of All Saints of North America

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday was the Feast of All the Saints, and today is the Feast of all the local saints of each land—if you are in Russia, it's the Feast of All Russian Saints. If you are on Mount Athos, it's the Feast of the Saints of Mt. Athos, and so forth. For us Orthodox here in America, it is the Feast of all the Saints of North America.... Regrettably there are few, barely a handful, not even a dozen. Orthodoxy is still quite young in this country, but this is no excuse. Other countries produced a huge wheat field of saints in their first century of Christianity. We Americans haven't yet done our share and made our contribution to the great host of saints in the heavenlies. Thus, this sermon this morning...

The Gospel read today gives us an interesting account of the calling by Christ of the first Apostles on the shore of the Lake of Galilee—a place that figures prominently in many events in the life of the Lord. Among those events was the Sermon on the Mount, which was given on a hill overlooking this lake. It is also sometimes called the Sea of Galilee, the Lake of Gennesaret, and sometimes the Sea of Tiberias. It is in the north of Israel, near the Golan Heights (which is often in the news these days in middle eastern politics) and is the largest fresh water lake in the land—about 13 miles long and 8 miles wide—so, very good sized. It is also the lowest fresh-water lake on earth. It's in the shape of a harp or a lyre, which is why it is sometimes called in Scripture by its Hebrew name, Gennesaret, which means harp or lyre.

Jesus sees Simon and Andrew fishing near the shore and He calls out to them, "Follow Me!" And immediately they return to shore and leave their boats and their nets. Then the Lord meets James and John, also fishermen, who are with their father, Zebedee, and He calls them, too, and they leave their father and follow him, along with Simon and Andrew.

But you know, this isn't *just* an historical record of what happened on that day. It also teaches us that God sometimes calls us to abandon our professions, our previous lives, and even sometimes our friends or families, in order to follow Him. This is not to be seen as a negative; Christ's call has a very positive aspect: *we must, to some degree or another, follow the Master!*

All of us have been called by Christ. We were certainly called by His grace when we received baptism and chrismation. And we have continued to receive His grace since then, and every reception of grace is still another "call" to us from the Master. Some of us have not answered those calls. Some are in the process of doing so, and others still have to really "hear" the call and then respond. This tells us that we should be thinking not so much of "who we are now," but of *who and what He can make of us*. Remember, in the Gospel narrative the Lord said, "Follow Me, and I will *make you* fishers of men." To us today He says, "Follow Me, *and I will make you*" into someone or something greater and better than you ever could have imagined: I will make you a saint!

Some of us will perhaps be holy parents, others holy monastics, still others, holy in their professions and good and holy models for others. But at the moment, for many of us, we can honestly say that, truly "It doth not yet appear what we shall be." And the reason for this is that we have heard the call from Christ, but we have not fully yet answered it. But, after all, who could have suspected, on that day along the shores of the Galilee, that the Apostles would one day be the leaders and founders of the Church, great missionaries and preachers of the Gospel, miracle-workers, and--all but St. John--martyrs for the Lord?

They didn't suspect any such destiny on the day they were called, nor did their families and friends; the Lord knew, but they didn't.

In a similar way, we don't know what the Lord will make of us, either, if we finally, really, and completely yield ourselves up to Him. For us, today, our future is a mystery, still an unopened book. But *I* think it's time to *open* that book and turn to the first page of the first chapter! Sometimes we feel discouraged about ourselves. I know I do. But this is because we are not looking at what Jesus can make of us if we will only *cooperate* with Him. We see our weaknesses, our laziness, our faults, and we think that that's all there is. But the Lord Himself is looking at us, and He sees not the wretches that we are today, but *what we can be!* And this should encourage us in our moments of feeling like failures. As Scripture tells us, "He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes." (I Sam. 2:8)

Think of what the Lord made out of the initial chaos of creation! If He could order the entire cosmos from what scientists call a "big bang" and bring all that we know and see and touch and feel and experience into existence in an instant, what can he not do with us, "beggars on a dunghill" or, in some cases, we are not the beggars, we are the "dunghill" itself? So just think of it! And think of what must have happened when He said, at the beginning, "Let there be light, and there was light." Can we even conceive of what that all meant, what that was about? Cannot the same ineffable Being fill *us* little beings with light, too, and banish our inner darkness? After all, as St. John teaches us at the beginning of his Gospel, "He is that light that came into the world."

How we may have started our lives—our parents, our siblings, our childhood, our education, our young adult lives, and so forth—is not necessarily how we are supposed to finish out our lives. A 19th century preacher put it very well when he said, "We are like the fishes, making sin to be our element; and the good Lord comes, and with the gospel net He takes us, and he delivers us from the life and love of sin. But He has not wrought for us all that He can do, nor all that we should wish Him to do, when He has done this."

He has much more in mind for us. Oh, not worldly riches, and not a yacht or the other things men pine and struggle and rob for. No, contrary to those who preach the "prosperity Gospel," Christ has none of this in mind for us. Not earthly riches, but spiritual and heavenly riches, are what He promises once He takes us, His fish, out of the sea of sinfulness.

We today can barely imagine what shocking tempests are coming to this world, to this very country. We are being warned even now by sober and responsible sociologists and economists all over the place that great social unrest and upheaval is nearby. It may even lead to the collapse of our nation and the break-up of our society. All of the elements to bring this about are now in place and just waiting for the right trigger.

Therefore, Christ is not calling us to continue to be "fish" in the sea of sin, but, rather, to *fishermen of souls*, just as He called the Apostles and Disciples. This is to be our main work. This is our calling. And this means that however small and meager is the little flame or spark that you or I carry in our souls, we must bring it out from under the bushel and fan and feed it and set it on a candle stand, as the Lord Himself instructs us in the New Testament. This is what all of those who have been saved, all of those whom we number among the ranks of the saints, both known and unknown, have done—or, rather, what they have allowed Christ to do with them in their lives. The small little glowworms that the saints started out as, became, in the hands of Christ, flaming torches to light up the darkness of the surrounding night of their times. And we must do the same. As St. Seraphim of Sarov said "Acquire the spirit of peace [that is, the Holy Spirit] and thousands around you will be saved." That's all. That's it. One doesn't have to become

a priest or a monastic, or even a martyr. All one has to do is acquire the Holy Spirit (which will be the subject of our class after Liturgy this morning). And if we do this, then in a mystical way others around will start running for Christ and into His arms, too. The details for how this will occur in each of our individual lives will be different, of course, but it will happen.

“Follow Me,” Christ is whispering to us every moment of every day. Usually we are listening to other voices, other sounds, but He is very persistent and keeps saying, “Follow me and I will make something of you.” Not something great in the eyes of the world—heaven forbid—but great in the eyes of My Father, who is in Heaven. You don’t need “self-esteem”; you need *God’s esteem*.

And, Gerondissa, brothers and sisters, this same voice is not only constantly whispering to us, but it is also a trumpet voice, sounding down from the shore of Galilee two thousand years: “Follow Me,” it asks. “Follow Me,” it proclaims. “Follow Me!” He commands. Let us hear, answer, and obey, from this moment on.

In closing I want to quote from the conclusion of the biography of Fr. Seraphim of Platina:

“A few days after the lectures of the 1982 Pilgrimage had ended, it was the eve of the Feast of the Transfiguration. As usual, Fr. Seraphim was to give the sermon on this night, beneath the stars. In his last lecture he had spoken of our Christian call here on earth; but now—in what turned out to be his last sermon—he was to remind his listeners of their ultimate destination. It is also interesting that, in his sermon on the Feast of the Transfiguration eight years before, he had spoken of how little time is allotted to us in *this* life to prepare for our salvation; but now, in the sermon right before his early, unexpected death, he was to speak mostly of the life beyond.... He stood silent for a while, looking at the dark gorge and star-filled sky, and then began:

“Beholding the majesty of God’s creation, we catch a glimpse, however vague and shadowy, of the beauty of God’s eternal Kingdom, for which we were all created. We must always remember that our home is in the heavens; we must shake off all the vain and petty passions and worries that keep us tied to the ground, to the fallen earthly world, that keep us from realizing the purpose of our creation. How easily we forget the very reason for our existence....

“The end-times are already here,” he continued, “we see clearly the preparation of the world for Antichrist. Christians will be faced with an unprecedented trial of their faith and love for God.... Let us therefore at least begin to struggle against the fetters of petty passions, and remember that our true home is not here, but in the heavens. Let us “strive towards our heavenly homeland,” as St. Herman (of Alaska) used to say...*Ad astra! Ad astra!*” Father exclaimed in Latin, “To the stars! To the stars!”

If we are following Christ, then that is indeed our goal: To the stars! To the stars; that is, to heaven!—and let that be our goal and nothing else and nothing less.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.