

A HOMILY FOR THE SUNDAY OF ALL SAINTS

About the Origin of the Feast

Brothers and sisters,

On the Sunday after Pentecost, our Holy Orthodox Church celebrates the memory of All Saints, that is, of all God's righteous ones who, in every land and century, have pleased the Lord by deeds of faith. So doing, she shows herself to be of one mind with the prophet-king David, who wrote, *But to me, exceedingly honourable are Thy friends, O Lord.*¹ Her hope is that, recalling the struggles, virtues, and triumphs of the saints, we will turn away from earthly things and from sin, and become emulators of the saints' longsuffering and courage, in

¹ Ps. 138:16

accordance with the Apostle Paul's words in the Epistle to the Hebrews which we heard today: *Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every burden, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race set before us.*²

Already in Old Testament times many achieved sanctity by faith in the coming Messiah, but the number of saints increased vastly when, having suffered, died, undergone burial, and risen, our Saviour completed the incarnate dispensation here below by ascending to heaven, whence He sent down His Most Holy Spirit. In view of this, the Church of Christ has chosen to celebrate the feast of All Saints on a Sunday soon after the week of the Lord's Passion and Resurrection, and immediately following Pentecost. Before His death, the Lord said, *Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but*

² Heb. 12:1

*if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.*³ All Saints are the abundant fruit produced by Jesus' death, plentifully watered by the Holy Spirit's grace, which descended on Pentecost.

Many saints have their own day on the *Menologion*, or church calendar, but many others, although known to God, remain unknown to us; therefore, it was necessary to appoint a yearly celebration for all of them in common, lest some not be lauded with the praises they all so richly deserve. Furthermore, by commemorating the saints together, we are reminded that they all struggled for one and the same Christ, despite the varied circumstances of their lives. Meditating on their diverse struggles and deaths, which nevertheless led to the common Kingdom, we realize that nothing incidental can prevent our attaining union with Christ Jesus, the Bridegroom of souls,

³ John 12:24

except for our own unwillingness to persecute the old man and put on the new.

The feast of All Saints began as the Synaxis of All Martyrs, and only later became a commemoration of not just the martyrs, but of the various ranks of God's favorites who were not slain for Christ, but bore witness to Him in other ways. The widening of the significance of the feast took place in the tenth century, during the reign of the pious Byzantine Emperor Leo the Wise, a number of whose hymns adorn the divine services of the Church. Leo was the second ruler of the most eminent and powerful of Byzantine dynasties, that of the "Macedonians," founded by his father, Basil I. Having grown up in utmost poverty and come to Constantinople seeking his fortune, Basil secured a position as groom at court, thanks to his unusual physical strength. With this began his fabulous ascent, the result of his own outstanding abilities and the caprice of the Emperor

Michael, son of the blessed Theodora, famous for her restoration of the holy icons on the Sunday of Orthodoxy. The clever and crafty peasant became the ruler's most intimate friend and eventually his co-emperor. He married Michael's former mistress, Eudocia Ingerina, and finally, sensing a dangerous change in his benefactor's attitude toward him, had Michael murdered.

Basil had doubts as to whether Leo was his son or Michael's, so he nurtured resentment against the youth. His eldest son, Constantine, the offspring of his first marriage, died while still a young man, and in his grief Basil sought consolation in the conjuring of Theodore Santavarinus, who although Bishop of Euchaita, was an adept of the black art and summoned up a demon to pose as Constantine's ghost. The devout Leo, however, shunned the deceiver, whose power over Basil grew daily. Santavarinus bitterly resented Leo's attitude, and also

feared him as the co-emperor and heir to the throne, so one day he went secretly to Leo, warned him of a plot against his father, and advised him to keep a knife handy in his boot for use in the event of an attempt on Basil's life. Then the wizard hurried to tell Basil that Leo was carrying a knife with intent to assassinate him.

One day, while they were hunting, Basil commanded Leo to pull off his boot. Outraged to find that Leo was indeed hiding a knife, Basil had him and his wife Theophania imprisoned for more than three years. Santavarinus tried to persuade Basil to put out Leo's eyes, but the Patriarch and the members of the imperial council vehemently declared their opposition to this.

In prison, Leo and Theophania spent all their time praying and begging God to make manifest their innocence. One evening, at a court banquet, a talking parrot kept for the Emperor's entertainment began to squawk, "O woe, woe, my

lord Leo!” Hearing this, the nobles were astonished, and stopped eating and drinking. Basil asked what was troubling them and, with eyes full of tears, they replied, “If a bird devoid of reason laments for its master, how can we who are rational creatures eat and drink joyfully, knowing that your son and our lord is imprisoned undeservedly? You are angry with him for no good reason. O Emperor, if your son has raised his hand against you or done you any evil, bring him to us, and we shall cut him to pieces. If, however, he is guilty of no wrongdoing (as we are certain), why do you torment him? He is, after all, your own offspring.”

Pity for his son prevailed over his fears, and Basil had Leo and Theophania released. Soon afterwards, Basil died and Leo became sole emperor. The wise Leo had Santavarinus beaten, gouged out his eyes, and exiled him to Athens. Thus the false Christian and false bishop received his due.

Leo's wife Theophania had, from earliest childhood, shown signs of future holiness, delighting her parents at every turn by her discretion and virtue. In prison suffering deepened her character, and upon release she gave herself over wholeheartedly to struggling for the salvation of her soul. Counting the imperial dignity as nought, she had psalms and hymns on her lips day and night. She lived solely to please Christ, adorned herself as little as possible for an empress, and beneath her robes wore a hair shirt. Her usual fare was bread and her drink water, and when compelled to attend a banquet, she barely touched the food. Large sums of money passed through her hands, but she gave them to paupers, orphans, and widows. Impoverished monasteries and hermitages found in the Christ-loving Empress an extremely generous benefactress. She treated the servants as her brothers and sisters, referring to none simply by name, but considering each honored by the Lord with

a calling, always added their title of service. Theophania never belittled others, swore, or spoke without need. Although her bed was covered with fine linen inwoven with gold, she slept on the floor upon a rough mat stretched out over animals' bones. Her sleep was brief, because she arose at midnight to glorify God and water her couch with tears, like the prophet David. Due to this severe way of life, her health declined, but she never left off unceasing prayer and the study of holy books, nor her charitable deeds.

Theophania knew beforehand the day of her departure, and summoned her relatives, friends, and servants to give them a final kiss. Then she left her earthly throne to stand beside the Lord of glory, joining the ranks of all saints in heaven. Being a witness to her self-mortification, humility, and almsgiving, the Emperor Leo regarded her, even during her lifetime, not as a wife, but as his intercessor before God, and prior to her death

began construction of a church which he intended to dedicate to her. Learning this, the blessed Theophania absolutely forbade him to do any such thing; whereupon, Leo convoked an assembly of bishops who, with the consent of the entire Church of God, decreed that All Saints be commemorated on the Sunday after Pentecost. The church he had begun Leo dedicated to All Saints, saying, “Theophania is one of the righteous, so when the festival of All Saints is celebrated, she will be extolled, unto the glory of God, Who is wondrous in the saints.”

And so, dear Christians, this is how the present feast of All Saints came to be. May we all glorify God in all His saints, today and every day, and unto the ages! Amen.