



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Of Saints and Boddhisatvas"**
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Ecclesiasticus 2: 7-11
Second Reading Ephesians 1: 15-23
Gospel Luke 6: 20-26

From the epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 2, verse 1:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."

The feast of All Saints, which is officially the first of November, is one of the five "big days" of the Church year. Nevertheless, it suffers from misunderstanding because for many people it is either eclipsed by Halloween or else it is purposefully ignored because it sounds too 'catholic'. The reason for that is the idea of saints: who they are and what they do, and the fact that there are two very different views on the subject depending not so much on Scripture, but on one's church tradition.

Protestants tend to see all Christians as saints, and indeed that reference can be found in the Bible where St Paul writes about his charity collection for the church in Jerusalem as being for "the saints." But in other places Scripture refers to those who have died as supportive witnesses for those of us here on earth. The subject is not helped by the extremes to which some Christian traditions go in making specific

saints into “little gods” in the form of decorated idols that can be approached for special favors instead of praying to God. That creates problems.

But any attempt I make to explain what a saint is will also suffer from apparent church party politics if I stray too far in a Protestant or a Catholic direction. For that reason, I am going to deal with the subject by using a parallel from a completely different tradition, that of Buddhism. Bear with me, if you will.

Buddhism is older than Christianity and it shares with our religion some of the basic presumptions of all major faiths: that there is more to life than we experience with our senses, that some kind of moral behavior is expected of us in this life, and that we are destined for something more than we are at present. According to this religion, the first human being to discover the path to a happier, truer life was Gautama Siddhartha, who subsequently was called the Buddha, or ‘awakened one.’ Buddha is not a god, nor do Buddhists worship him, even though the physical expression of honor to him in temples all over Asia looks like it. He is considered more of a teacher, and one to be followed through imitation. Those who do aspire to become awakened, or buddhas, themselves.

Like Christianity’s division into Protestant and Catholic, there are two major schools of thought within Buddhism: Hinayana and Mahayana, the Lesser and the Greater vessels. Hinayana, or Theravada Buddhism is the “Protestant” one, if you will. It’s what you will find in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. It is the older of the two and emphasizes the individual’s personal quest for salvation. Acts of compassion and kindness are expected, of course, but the final goal is to transcend all the limitations of the physical world and become part of a greater consciousness that can only vaguely be described as ‘God’. The ‘saints’ of this tradition are those who have achieved their spiritual goal.

In Mahayana, what we might call the “Catholic” side of Buddhism, and the one found in the Chinese cultural orbit, the ultimate goal is much the same, but some of those who have achieved enlightenment elect to stay behind in order to help those still on the way. The merit they have built up can be applied to others. In short, they are

very much like the Catholic Christian saints who are seen as personal helpers along the way, rather the way that the author of Hebrews envisions his "great cloud of witnesses" surrounding us here on earth. The Buddhist saints, the Boddhisatvas, are figures of compassion with an interest in the lives of those still on earth. They delay their own eternal bliss in order to help others to attain theirs.

Now this sermon is not meant to convert you to Buddhism, only to make the parallel with our own teaching of the Communion of Saints. The parallel exists not only in the ideal teachings, but also in the way that they have abused. Both Mahayana Buddhism and Catholic Christianity have tended to elevate the saints to such a degree that they accept prayers, grant favors and become "sponsors" for particular vocations or needs. Chinese temples are just as filled with statues of the Boddhisatvas, or saints of their religion as Catholic churches are all of the helper saints that are resorted to for everything from getting a husband to curing a tooth ache. Both are dangerous distractions from the basic, true teaching about the family of God's people in heaven and on earth.

The saints are not gods and don't want to be except in the way they share in the nature of Christ Himself. Now that they are freed from the limitations of this world and can see things from a higher, clearer perspective, they certainly know better who God is and who they are. They also know that it is faith in Christ that gains us our salvation, however supporting the prayers of our Christian friends might be.

But the idea of human compassion is compelling. It can be seen even in very Protestant believers' insistence that parents and other loved ones who have died are still watching over them and are interested in what goes on here on earth. The idea of the saint as a partner in prayer is that same sentiment writ large: a personal and dramatic way of emphasizing the communion that links all of the Faithful both in the world and in that beyond. If death cannot separate us from Christ, then we in Christ cannot be separated from each other.

Whether you prefer the individual approach and honor those who have achieved salvation without further need of this earth, or if the idea of the saint voluntarily

taking a rain check on heaven in order to help us along the race that is set before us appeals more, the point is similar: we have role models and we are never alone. We who share the faith in Christ crucified and resurrected for the sins of the whole world and who form his Body, his Church here on earth, are destined to remain part of "that number" of the redeemed. And on this day when we celebrate our family ties with all Christians here on earth and also with those in that greater life to which some have already been called, we can reflect on the words of our first hymn:

O blest communion, fellowship divine!

We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;

Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.

Alleluia!