

1] The origins of today's feast, the commemoration of All Saints, is revealed in one of the hymns, a doxastikon, sung at Vespers last evening: 'You are the pillars of the Church and the fulfilment of the Gospel, O divine ranks of Martyrs ...Your shed blood dried up the libations of the idols. And having nourished the perfection of believers through your slaughter, you dazzled the incorporeals, standing before Christ wearing your crowns...'

2] This was in fact, at first, the memorial of the Holy Martyrs of the Church, the first Christian saints to be venerated by the faithful. Hence, we heard a reading from the letter to the Hebrews looking back to those who suffered for the Lord under the Old Covenant of Moses; those who, although judged righteous in the eyes of God, had to await the coming of grace before they might enter into glory. 'And all these, having obtained a witness through their faith, did not receive the promise, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.'

3] Yet we call this the feast of All Saints, the commemoration everyone, of both the old and new dispensations, who has borne witness to the life in God, by holiness of life.

4] Leo VI, known as the Wise, was emperor of the New Rome, Constantinople, from 886 - 911AD. His first wife was the saintly empress, Theophano, one of the great women in the History of the Byzantine Empire. Known for her real devotion to the prayer life of the Church, and for her practical charity for the poor, she and Leo eventually separated - not least because it had been an arranged marriage, forced upon Leo, and besides, he had taken a mistress! Theophano eventually retired to a monastery and ended a life of great holiness in the year 897.

5] Emperor Leo had wanted to dedicate a new church in her honour but had no religious authority to do that. Instead he built the church of All Saints, believing that she would be among them and would therefore be commemorated there. He did, however, succeed

in having the feast of All Martyrs expanded to include all the saints and decreed that it be observed on this Sunday following Pentecost. Western Christians, by the way, keep All Saints on 1st November; a feast called in older English, All Hallows, and the vigil of the feast, All Hallows Eve, or, Halloween, which sadly, has acquired unfortunate connections, not so much through the folk traditions of Ireland, but rather, through the creative imagination of Hollywood!

6] So it is that we Orthodox Christians, worshippers of the Living God, come together this day to rejoice, for that holiness that belongs to the Triune God alone, is seen by us, reflected in His saints; those whom God has consecrated to Himself, the same ones share, by grace, in the divine energies, revealing on earth the life of the kingdom of heaven. As the Moon reflects the light of the Sun; as a mirror reveals the image before it; as iron takes on the white heat of the forge, so the saints of God stand witness to an extraordinary life, unimaginable to most in this world. As Paul writes to the Corinthians concerning the wisdom of God and the mystery hidden before the ages, 'What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived — the things God has prepared for those who love him' [1Cor.2:9]

7] Yet here we are today: we are currently the modern people, belonging to the latest generation on this earth. Here we are, seemingly looking back to the saints of the past. But wait a minute! Let us check our thinking; this is not the mind of Christ. As far as History is concerned; as regards Time in this world, yes, the saints belong to the past, but not for the Church of the Living God, for the saints are alive in God. As Christ tells the Sadducees in St Matthew's gospel, 'God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.' [Matt.22:32]

8] And just as we know that the saints are alive; just as we know that they pray for us and that we ask their prayers, so we know also that holiness is not for the past only: not just for Old and New Testament times; not just for the ancient martyrs; not just the Fathers of the Church, or the dwellers in the desert or the saints of Mount Athos; of the now ruined city of Antioch, or of holy mother Russia. Holiness is not exclusive to the Age of Faith, as some historians called the Middle Ages, nor even the new martyrs of any land you

might care to name; even if we should cite the saints of these British Isles, of whom St Bede wrote about in his Ecclesiastical History - whomever you might mention, the saints have become our contemporaries in the Church. But do you see, there, the challenge, do you hear the summons? Yes, we are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses; yes, we are of the same household of faith. But think of that grace abounding more and more: are we among them yet; shall we be among them in time? It is only our own will that stands in the way. When it comes to our own fight against the passions, how is it we are bested so often, having to yield so often in the spiritual warfare against sin?

9] Did we not receive baptism? Of course we did: then there can be no excuse. Each one of us has been enrolled, each one, enlisted, as St Paul expresses it, called to be saints. This belongs as much to this age as to any in the past.

10] There is a false humility, you know, one that says, I am not worthy of such a struggle; a sinner like me could never become a saint. Obviously, someone like that must never have heard of repentance; does not believe in the transforming power of God the Holy Spirit. Like those who stay away or put off receiving the Holy Gifts. Yes, they are truly awful mysteries, so holy that we dare not approach! But there is repentance, there is confession and prayer and fasting: we can do what we can and God will supply what is lacking.

11] And for those of us who receive from the chalice regularly, there is, indeed, an opposite danger, not false humility this time, but sloth, and that creeping over-familiarity, forgetting our place before the throne of God and a presumption that can be rooted in pride. Yet, as one of the traditional prayers of preparation, ascribed to St John Chrysostom, reads, 'It is not with careless heart that I approach thee, O Christ my God, but I come trusting in thine infinite goodness, and fearing lest I may be drawn afar from thee and become the prey of the wolf of souls.'

12] But how we grow in sanctity as we pass through this world will depend indeed upon the grace of God, but also our own will, our own

determined effort, to co-operate with Him. Wherever the distractions come from, or the persecutions, or the inevitable sufferings that come in the course of this life, we must heed Our Lord's own words in St Luke's gospel: 'By your patience possess your souls.' [Lk.21:19] Patience, an idea that has its roots in the word meaning to suffer, will be the secret of our sanctification.

13] Think of the great St Anthony of Egypt! At one point in his strange and marvellous life in the desert he was worn down by the struggle. The devil had been merciless, assaulting him with temptations, confusions, delusions, terrible visions. After so many wounds Anthony became exhausted and felt ready to give up. He finally asked the Lord, "Where were you? I called upon you and did not come to me." Perhaps some of us have had that experience, or something like it. But the Lord did reply in His own good time. "O Anthony, I was with you, rejoicing in your struggle and now I will appear to you in order to confirm to you that you are in a righteous struggle and on the true path."

14] Will we not also judge that the struggle is worth it, to gain a place among the saints, to attain to eternal life, to know not just peace, but everlasting bliss? Even if, in the meantime, it is only some earthly miracle that you long for, do not give up, for as with St Anthony, God will know your patience and rejoice in your struggle. And should such matters not be resolved as you had wished, even then, faith will reveal to you that what God wills is even better, and will assure you that you are under His providence, as Paul, once again, says to the Romans, 'And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.' [Rom.8:28]