

All Saints' Day

On All Saints' Day, we celebrate that God has called His Church out of this world and that we are part of that Church. We also belong to the communion of saints that has no beginning or end, because it finds its true existence as “the one holy communion, the mystical body” of Christ who sanctifies it, as the Collect for today reminds us. In that communion, we are encouraged by examples of how God graciously works in and through the lives of saints who came before us, so that we may live our own godly lives as God's children here on earth (Second Reading 1 John 3:1-3). The First Reading (Rev. 7:9-17) highlights all the saints in heaven worshipping the Lord before His throne, no longer suffering thirst or hunger but experiencing the reward promised in the Gospel (Matt. 5:12).

The Reformation changed how Christians commemorate All Saints' Day. The Augsburg Confession provides guidance on this issue: “*The Scriptures do not teach that we are to call on the saints or to ask the saints for help*” (AC XXI 2). The Apology states the reason: “*We know that confidence is to be placed in Christ's intercession, because this alone has God's promise. We know that Christ's merits alone atone for us*” (Ap XXI 31). Why then should we still have an All Saints' Day?

In Scripture, we are told to “*remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith*” (Heb. 13:7), and our Lord says of Mary, “*Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her*” (Mt 26:13). Thus, the reformers have clarified the term *saints* to include all deceased and living believers, as we can see from the apostle Paul's frequent reference to his recipients as saints (e.g., Col 1:2). All Saints' Day then commemorates all those who have deceased and departed from the Church Militant. If there is a commemoration of an individual saint, he or she should be honoured but not invoked, and such honour is threefold:

The first is *thanksgiving*. We should thank God because He has shown examples of mercy, because He wishes to save people, and because He has given teachers and other gifts to the Church. These gifts, since they are the greatest, should be amplified. The saints themselves, who have faithfully used these gifts, should be praised just as Christ praises faithful businessmen (Mt 25:21, 23). The second service is the *strengthening of our faith*. When we see Peter's denial forgiven, we also are encouraged to believe all the more that grace truly superabounds over sin (Rom 5:20). The third honour is the *imitation*, first of faith, then of the other virtues. Everyone should imitate the saints according to his calling. (Ap XXI 4–6, emphases added)

These references from Scripture and the clarifications from the Augsburg Confession and Apology show us that the commemoration of the saints points to God's active involvement in history. He works among the cloud of witnesses that have walked the earth before us (Heb. 12:1; 13:7), and He continues to work among us. We see how God pours His grace over us humans, how He bestows gifts, and how He enables His Word to be proclaimed, believed, and lived out. We, too, are saints, called by God and chosen to serve Him. We are connected to a long line of saints and taken up into the fellowship of the triumphant, the heavenly Church, so that in the worship service, we join with the saints in the heavenly Church and sing, “Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth.”