

December 28, 2003

The Sunday After the Lord's Nativity

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Epistle to the Hebrews, which repeatedly speaks of Christian worship in terms of "approach" (4:16; 7:25; 10:1,22; 11:6), "entrance" (10:19), and "drawing near" (7:19) to God, describes this worship as a complex liturgical gathering: "But you have come [literally 'approached'] to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel" (12:22-24). That is to say, when the Christian comes to God, he doesn't come "one on one," so to speak; he approaches also the company of angels and saints.

This text is particularly striking because of its explicit reference to Christ our Lord as the Mediator of the covenant that gives us access to God. The unique mediation of Christ, an important theme in Hebrews (Cf. also 8:6; 9:15), has rather often been cited in recent centuries to negate the role of the saints in heaven with respect to the Christian worship on earth. Yet, here in this description of Christian worship, along with the mediation of Christ and His redemptive blood, the author of Hebrews speaks also of "the spirits of just men made perfect." The author obviously saw nothing incompatible between the unique mediation of Christ and the communion of the glorified saints in the Church's worship.

Although the bodies of the departed saints are elsewhere described as "sleeping" (1 Thessalonians 4:13; 1 Corinthians 15:6-20), their spirits are very much alive and alert; indeed, they are already "made perfect," even though they still await the

glorification of their bodies. The departed saints are certainly not "dead," because those who believe in Christ will never die (John 11:26). The departed saints did not simply live a long time ago and now they are gone. Oh no, they are still very much alive, standing in worship with the angels before God's throne, and that is why, in the mediation of Christ and through His blood, we may join them in worship.

These "spirits of just men made perfect" are, of course, identical to the "great cloud of witnesses" spoken of only a few verses earlier (12:1). Indeed, the previous chapter had just narrated their biblical stories: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and the others, most of whom the author did not name because "time would fail" him to do so (11:32).

By these heavenly "witnesses" we saints on earth are said to be "surrounded," as though to suggest that they themselves form a larger group than we. To describe their company, the author uses the image of a cloud, a classical metaphor designating a thickly packed crowd of people (cf. *Iliad* 4.274; *Aeneid* 7:797). In the density of their representation these "spirits of just men made perfect" are comparable to the "innumerable company of angels."

These texts from the Epistle to the Hebrews, then, indicate that all of these glorified saints, "the spirits of just men made perfect," are part of the awareness and experience of Christians at worship. The reason that the Church adorns her houses of worship with the icons of the glorified saints is that Christian worship raises believers up in mind and spirit to pray with those saints at the throne of God. We believers have access to their company in God's presence because of the saving blood of Jesus our Mediator. Symbolized in the twenty-four elders, these saints offer our prayers to God with their own and with the praises of the angels (Revelation 5:8; 8:3). Christian worship is inseparable from the communion of the saints.

Besides this, the departed saints (and so many more have been added since the Epistle to the Hebrews was written) are also held out as models for our emulation. This was the whole point of the list of the champions of faith in Hebrews 11. This list invites us to study the biblical saints especially, "who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises" (11:33). On page after page Holy Scripture tells the stories of these men and women, members of that ancient family into which, by Baptism, we have been incorporated. Let us examine their examples, "considering the outcome of their conduct" (13:7).

©2003 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php