

SOLEMNITY OF ALL SAINTS November 1, 2007

When I was in first grade—around the mid-1950's—I remember that Halloween very clearly, in fact it's probably the one I remember best. My teacher, a Divine Providence nun named Sister Burnette, told the class that for our school Halloween party we had to dress up as our patron saint. No witches, goblins, ghosts, politicians. Well, that meant that I would have to be St. John. But *which* St. John? There are several.

I certainly didn't want to be St. John the Baptist, especially not after he was beheaded, because that would mean I'd have to carry my head around in my hands, and that didn't sound very attractive. So I decided to be St. John the Apostle, because he was called The Beloved Disciple and I really liked the sound of that.

So my parents, God bless them, spent a lot of time making me look like St. John, or at least as close as they could, since neither of them had any idea what St. John the Apostle looked like. They made me a long white tunic (out of a bedsheet, if I recall correctly) and then a long sash that hung over one shoulder. And for once, I really looked like a saint.

Because I knew my parents had spent a lot of time on that costume I was happy to wear it trick-or-treating through our neighborhood that evening. When people asked me who I was supposed to be, I answered proudly, "I'm St. John." Many of them, who knew my family, smiled knowingly, you know, good little Catholic boy. But I think some others probably thought I was nuts. But what did I care? I thought it was a great costume.

Halloween actually got its origin from today's celebration of all saints. It was originally called All Hallows Eve, and the faithful would dress up as their favorite saint to ward off the devil. Through the years, the dressing up has gotten maybe just a little bit carried away. But it's all in great fun.

Our readings today give us a better view of this feast. But even better yet, they give us what I like to call a do-it-yourself sainthood kit. We are actually told how to become a saint and how to live saintly lives!

The first reading is from the very difficult and mysterious Book of Revelation, the last book of the NT. We are told that the saints are the ones who have survived the time of great distress and have washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb. How could anything washed in blood become white? Well, the blood referred to here is the blood that was shed for sins, making us clean and forgiven.

The second reading tells us that we are God's children now. Well, that in itself is a comforting thought. But it goes on to say that what we shall become is even better yet: we will become like God because we will see him *as he is*. This loving God face to face is our destiny, it is, in fact, our whole purpose.

The Gospel really pulls it all together. St. Matthew's version of the Beatitudes tells us *exactly* how to become saints. We are to be poor in spirit, mourners, meek, seeking righteousness, merciful, clean of heart, peacemakers and persecuted. Well. This is hard work, this sainthood business. But that's really what it's all about. This is the stuff of human life.

The eminent Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who died in 1988, once wrote: "The saints are true realists; they take seriously the hopelessness of man as it is and do not seek a refuge from the present in the future. They get on with the job in spite of everything and hope

against hope.... And if they are genuine, they never point to themselves; they themselves are only a reflection; it is the master of the flame who is all-important." What powerful words! And colorful too!

And this idea is echoed by our own Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, who wrote: "To become saints means to fulfill completely what we already are, raised to the dignity of God's adopted children in Christ Jesus....Nothing can bring us into close contact with the beauty of Christ himself other than the world of beauty created by faith and light that shines out from the faces of the saints, through whom his own light becomes visible."

My friends, we are called, each one of us, to become saints. But this doesn't mean we're supposed to be perfect because *the saints weren't perfect!* So, while becoming a saint may sound like an overwhelming challenge that we can't possibly measure up to, it really means nothing more than allowing the light of Jesus Christ to shine through us onto others.