Solemnity of All Saints – Marist School Mass
November 1, 2013

Becoming a Saint Means Saying No to Pride, Greed, and Power

I want to thank Mr. Donahue's students for putting into more contemporary language their understanding of each of the Beatitudes. I saw that some of the renditions brought a smile to our faces.

This morning's Gospel begins with the famous Sermon on the Mount. Jesus presents eight teachings, each beginning with a word that can be translated into English from the Latin Vulgate as either blessed or happy. These teachings are particularly treasured by us Christians because it is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity who is giving us a program for happiness. Jesus, who can't be wrong and who doesn't lie, is telling us how to achieve what all of us deeply desire: to be holy and to be happy.

Today's celebration of the Solemnity of All Saints, I want to focus on one of my favorite saints who seemed to have mastered Our Lord's program for happiness: St. Thomas More. He lived in 16th century England and was very powerful and influential as the Lord Chancellor of England. He was eventually martyred for his faith because of his opposition to King Henry VIII. Despite the troubled times in which he lived, joy ruled his person and household.

Here is how the biographer, John Farrow, describes what it was like to be in his presence.

> "…More's house was not a gloomy one. There was much fun and play. Dice and gambling were forbidden, but there were other games and play-acting to lighten the hours. Everyone, including the servants, was encouraged to play a musical instrument of some kind...More had a pet monkey, the source of much mischief and amusement, and being fond of animals, he made a collection of sizeable proportions which inhabited his gardens. Among his collection were a variety of birds and such animals as foxes, ferrets, weasels, and the like."

Undoubtedly, he would have smiled approvingly at what I observed a couple of years ago. I was walking down the steps from the rectory when I noticed one of our students lying on the concrete floor of the Arcade. She was intent on photographing something that had caught her artistic eye. It could have been a small plant struggling to make its way through a crack in the concrete. It might have been an ant carrying something five times its weight. I doubt that she noticed me walking by. I don't think she cared about what anyone would think. I guess she forgot about what tests she had to take that day or what homework she needed to complete. She was lost in the beauty of that moment.

From my perspective, she was preaching a homily. It was on the first beatitude: "Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. I realize that she never said a word, but she was following the advice of another saint, St. Francis of Assisi, who had said, "Preach the Gospel at all times; use words if you have to."

This beatitude takes direct aim at what Fr. Colin identified as one of the three great sins he wanted the Marists to avoid at all costs: pride. The other two are greed and power.

What is pride? Pride is when I make myself the center of my life. What is a dead giveaway that pride has you in its grip? It is when you hear yourself saying such things as "It's my life, and I will do what I want with it." Or, while in a conversation, you think, "I wish he/she would hurry up so I can make my point." Or, you are at a gathering, preoccupied with making the right impression, fretting over what to say next, or obsessed with what others will think about you. Pride is taking ourselves too seriously.

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One of my favorite movies is "A Man for All Seasons." It tells the story of St. Thomas More and is based on the play of the same name by Robert Bolt. A scene in the play involves Richard Rich, a young Cambridge graduate who wants to land a big job at the Court of Henry VIII. He comes to Thomas More, who was the Lord Chancellor of England at the time. Thomas More says to him, "I have a job for you. There is an opening in the local school." Richard Rich is terribly disappointed. "A teacher," he says with disgust. Thomas More replies, "Why not be a teacher? You'd be a fine teacher, perhaps a great one." "If I was," said Richard Rich, "who would know it?" Thomas More replies, "You, your pupils; God. Not a bad public, that."

Fr. Colin wanted the Marists to do great things for God. Richard Rich wanted to do great things to be noticed and applauded. Richard Rich was obsessed with himself and what others thought. That is what pride looks like.

What is the antidote to pride? It is being poor in spirit. What does that look like? It looks like the student I just described to you. During that moment, when she was captivated by what she was photographing, she wasn't worried about any of the things we usually obsess about. She had emptied herself of herself and could take in that moment's beauty and enjoy it. She had become poor in spirit.

Or it looks like Thomas More, who had lived his entire life prostrate before the Risen Christ. Like the lens of a camera, More remained focused on the one thing he did not want to lose: Christ's love for him and his love for Christ. Thomas More had become poor in spirit, having emptied himself of himself by refusing to live for fame, power, and wealth long before all these things were forcefully taken from him. And what was he left with?

I will end with a prayer composed by St. Thomas More to his daughter Meg just before his execution. It reflects his joyful spirit that not even his impending death could suppress. It also anticipates the joy which is all that will be left when, in God's presence, there will be no more sadness and where every tear will be wiped away. To his daughter and to all who did not know him but from what they would know about him, would share her loss; he penned the following:

"Pray for me, as I shall for thee; that merrily, we may meet in heaven."

Amen.