

11-05-23 All Saints Fr. Joseph

Today we celebrate All Saints Day. Officially, All Saints Day occurs on November 1, the day after All Hallows Eve or Hallowe'en. But, for convenience we generally move it to the next Sunday when it occurs during the week. We don't know how long the Church has actually celebrated the feast of All Saints; but we know it has been an official holiday on the Church calendar since at least 609, 1,414 years ago. All Saints is officially the fourth most important holiday on the Christian Calendar, after Easter, Christmas, and Pentecost.

Now if you know any St. Michael's people, "saints" might not be the first word that comes to mind. In the popular imagination, when people think of saints they think of holy hermits living in monasteries or caves, isolated from the world, living lives untouched by sinful thoughts, devoid of even the slightest hint of sin or self-indulgence.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. The greatest saints have lived in the world fully -- like you folks, joyfully struggling for a better world, unafraid of sacrifice or loss, giving of themselves like Jesus did to make the world a better place.

All Saints is a great day to tell you about one of my favorite saints, Mother Maria Skobtsova, a saint from the Eastern Orthodox calendar. Mother Maria was born Liza Pilenko in Latvia, in 1891. When her father died during her teen years, she became embittered, angry with God, and embraced atheism. She threw herself into political activism and Bolshevism. She married a fellow Bolshevik

in 1910 at the age of 19, and was divorced three years later in 1913. She subsequently had a daughter, Gaiana out of wedlock. She went on to become deputy mayor of a small town in southern Russia, and when the White Russians briefly took over in 1918, they put her on trial for her Bolshevik sympathies. The judge in the case, Daniel Skotbsov, had previously known Liza as a student and acquitted her. Not long thereafter, the two of them fell in love and were married. They had two children, Yuri and Anastasia. As the political tides turned to communism, they became refugees, fleeing Russia for Georgia, then Yugoslavia, finally settling in Paris in 1923.

It was there, broken-hearted by all the failures and losses in her life, that she began to recognize her own sorrows in the face and the sorrows of Jesus, and began her own long journey back to the Church. When her second daughter Anastasia died from influenza in 1926, the marriage with Daniel fell apart. Yuri stayed with Daniel, and Liza moved into central Paris where she took up the way of the cross as her own and devoted herself to serving other refugees. (Blessed are the poor.) She coped with her own grief by sitting with those who mourned. (Blessed are those who mourn.) She dealt with the poverty of her own heart by embracing the poverty and alienation of Paris' poorest Russian immigrants. (Blessed are the gentle in heart.)

In 1932, her bishop granted her an ecclesial divorce from Daniel and allowed Liza to take monastic vows as an Orthodox nun, upon the condition that she would continue

her work in the world with the poor and, apparently, making allowances for her chain-smoking. She took the name of Mother Maria Skobtsova and became known for her unrelenting kindness, her cheerfulness . . . and her chain-smoking.

When the Nazis invaded Paris, Mother Maria became active in the resistance movement -- most notably, assisting a local Orthodox priest, Fr. Dmitri Klepinin, who provided Jews with fake baptismal certificates to help them escape the Nazis. (Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.)

The Gestapo eventually arrested Mother Maria, Fr. Dmitri, and her son, Yuri, who had been helping Fr. Dmitri. Yuri and Fr. Dmitri both died in a prison camp at Dora, and Mother Maria was sent to Ravensbrück in Germany. Those who knew her remembered her, even there, for her cheerfulness and her ready willingness to share her starvation rations with those who were weak or sick. On Holy Saturday in 1945, Mother Maria Skobtsova died in the gas chamber. Some witnesses said that she intentionally took the place of a young mother in order to wind up there. (Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you..)

Now, a twice-divorced mother of three, one of them born out of wedlock, former atheist, former Bolshevik, chain-

smoking nun, with a driving ambition to build community and lift up the disadvantaged sounds like someone who would fit right in here at St. Michael's, don't you think?

You will never know a saint by how "saintly" they are. You know a saint by the love of God that they let flow through themselves into the world. (If any of you are worrying, don't. I've known weirder saints than any of you.) Like Jesus, the saints are all about calling people out of their tombs and setting them free from the things that bind them. Look around at all the saints in this room who bless the life of this community. Look at the saints who have blessed your own lives, the people who, in many ways, called you out of your tombs and set you free. Some of them would make a twice-divorced Bolshevik/Atheist chain-smoking mother of three look, well, *saintly*. I look at them and, as we sang this morning, I think, *God help me*, I want to be one too.

So why do we celebrate All Saints' Day every year? Well, you remember that phrase from the Creed, "We believe in the Communion of Saints . . ." ? That's what all Saints Day is about.

The Communion of Saints is a *living* communion of souls - - living and dead -- even twice-divorced chain-smoking souls. For the Christian, our connection with those we know and love deeply in Christ never dies. Those saints who have gone before us keep a living connection with us, as well. Now, that "ongoing living connection" isn't an official part of Church doctrine; but I can tell you it is a part of *every* Christian pastor's experience, especially when

dealing with the dying and those who grieve -- every single one of us.

For the Christian, death is not an ending, but rather a gateway to a fuller life than we here can imagine. As we build a greater temple for Jesus in our own hearts day by day, we begin to experience that fuller life here in this one. Though, as Paul says, "Now we see him dimly, as though looking at a reflection in polished metal. Then we shall see him face to face."

Until then, we have the support, not only of one another but of the whole Communion of Saints, a great cloud of witnesses. For that, because I, personally, need the support, I say, Thanks be to God!