

# FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

November 1, 2023

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey

+In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Post haec vidi turbam magnam...After this I saw a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and tribes, and peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne, and in sight of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands (Apoc. 7:9).*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,  
My very dear sons,

There is a question that has crossed the mind of every believer at one time or another, and tested the mind of many a theologian, both in our day and in times past. It is the problem of the number of the elect: what part of mankind, in the end, will have been saved from the terrible fate of eternal damnation and what part welcomed into the blessed life of God's eternal friendship? "How narrow is the gate" says the Lord in Saint Matthew (7:14), "and how strait is the way that leads to life, and few there are that find it!" How can we reconcile this text with the picture of the great multitude of the elect found in the book of Revelation?

As a matter of mere curiosity this question deserves no answer. The wise man leaves such things to God, trusting Our Father in Heaven to work out the details of the world's final destiny. What do we earth-bound creatures have to do with such arduous and exalted matters? We need only attend to our own salvation and that of our neighbor.

At the same time, is it not normal that we wonder about what matters most to us, that is to say, about our own eternal destiny, and about what will become of our fellow human beings? What do Holy Scripture and orthodox Catholic teaching tell us about this—not as a matter of curiosity, but as an essential point of doctrine, relative to the salvation of mankind?

As is often the case, the problem here lies more in the interpretation of Scripture, than in any given text, and theological opinions migrate toward opposite poles. Some interpreters tend to explain the matter in a severe manner, limiting as much as possible the number of the elect. Heretics such as the Jansenists were quite adamant about the extremely small number of the saved. But not only the Jansenists held this view. In his famous sermon on *The Small Number of the Elect*, the eighteenth century French Bishop and orator, Jean-Baptiste Massillon, makes the case for the severe interpretation, staying nevertheless within the bounds of the Catholic faith.

Beloved Christians, our perdition is almost certain; and why are we not alarmed? If a voice from Heaven were heard in this temple, proclaiming aloud that one of us here present would be consigned to eternal flames, without disclosing the name, who would not tremble for himself? ...Are we in our senses, my dear hearers? Perhaps among all who listen to me now, ten righteous ones would not be found. It may be fewer still. What do I perceive, O my God! I dare not, with a fixt eye, regard the depths of Thy judgments and justice! Not more than one, perhaps, would be found among us all! And this danger

affects you not, my dear hearer! You persuade yourself that, in contrast to this great number who shall perish, you will be the happy individual!

It must be said that an impressive array of Catholic Saints and Doctors have held a similar view.

On the other end of the spectrum we find teachers that have concluded that all men will attain eternal salvation, a notion sometimes referred to as “universalism.” One well-known proponent of this view was the great Origen, who, in the third century, set forth a doctrine called, in Greek, “Apocatastasis,” according to which all creatures, including the devil, will be saved in the end, after passing through the fires of hell. Other great doctors taught this doctrine, including St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Clement of Alexandria and St. Maximus the Confessor. St. Jerome himself held it for a time. This doctrine, along with a number of other doctrines attributed to Origen, was nevertheless condemned by a Pope of the sixth century. Universalism as such cannot be said to represent Catholic teaching.

Among more recent theologians and church historians, there has been something of a rediscovery and appreciation of Origen, helped along in significant part by the voluminous writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who taught that we might at least *hope* that all men will be saved. Von Balthasar admits that we do not know (only God knows for sure); he does not affirm universal salvation; but he thinks we may hope for such a thing. The Church has not given a definitive response to the question posed by this teaching.

In the end, of course, we simply cannot know here below the number of the elect. Holy Scripture, however, including many passages of St. Paul and the Apocalypse, indicates that the great work of Redemption will not have been a failure. It may be that Our Lord’s words reported in Saint Matthew about few being chosen refer more precisely to the number of those that would accept the Gospel at the preaching of the Apostles, rather than to the number of the elect after the Last Judgment. In the great parable of the Wedding feast, only one individual is found to be lacking a wedding garment and cast out into the exterior shadows. Although the first invitees are excluded, the banquet hall is found to be quite full in the end. This does not seem to support the idea of a very few elect.

In fact, the apostles themselves asked Our Lord one day about this subject. In astonishment about Christ’s teaching that the chances of wealthy man’s getting to Heaven are less than those of a camel passing through the eye of a needle, they exclaimed, “Who then can be saved?” “And Jesus gazing upon them, said: With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible” (Mt. 19:26).

So, this is all very mysterious, and we remain for now in the dark. We do *hope* for the best, trusting that the work of Redemption will not have been in vain, but that salvation will come to a great number. Let there be no illusions: the way to Heaven is narrow, and our salvation is a most serious business. Our world, as never before, is morally obese and spiritually opaque. But if the Gate is narrow, the streets of the heavenly Jerusalem are broad, and as Saint John testifies, not empty. *Vidi turbam magnam...I saw a great multitude, which no man could number.*

In a little prayer taught by Our Lady to the children of Fatima, we find, perhaps, the best summary of the truly Catholic and wholly orthodox position of the question relative to the number of the elect and to what we must ask of God.

O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell; lead all souls to Heaven, mostly those most in need of Thy mercy. Amen.