

St. Nicholas Albanian Orthodox Church

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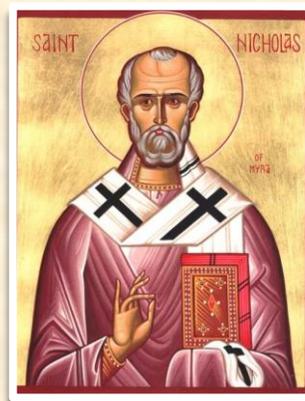
<http://stnicholasalbanianchicago.org>

Dear Families and Friends,

Each year on November 1st, the Roman Catholic Church celebrates the feast of All Saints (or All Hallows) hence the “origin” of the feast of Halloween, or literally “The eve of All Hallows or All Hallows evening”. Certainly, the celebration of this feast in the Western society and its secularization (costumes, trick or treating and other elements that have nothing to do with Saints per se) will not be the subject of our little article. However, from this I would love to direct our attention to the Calendar of our Orthodox Church. Do we celebrate All Saints day and when?

All Saints day is celebrated in the Orthodox Church on the first Sunday after Pentecost (The descent of the Holy Spirit 50 days after Pascha) and it is called “The Sunday of All Saints”. The Fathers of the Church have appointed this Sunday to commemorate and celebrate ALL the saints of the Church. We believe that the number of the canonized saints (basically those saints that we can see in the Holy Icons or whose lives we can read in the Synaxarion-Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church) is just but a fraction of the immense multitude of the saints, the majority of which is known to God alone.

Naturally, we might come to some very important questions: Who is a Saint? Why do we celebrate them and how they are important to us? To some it might sound very bold the statement that **“All Christians are called to become saints.”** This is not a tall order but the very purpose of the Christian life and the essence of the Divine plan of God for man. God created man in His image and likeness. Every human being, just because of the fact that shares this human nature is in the image of God and has the potential for holiness, becoming like God. (Continues on page 3)



Upcoming Events

November 15

Nativity Fast

The 15th of November marks the start of the **40 day** fasting period prior to the feast of the **Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the Flesh (Christmas)**

November 21

The Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple

November 25

Catherine the Great Martyr of Alexandria

Important Announcement

The classes of the **Religious Education Program** start after the Divine Liturgy at **11:30 am!**

How the children have grown in knowledge

During the month of October we had the blessing of a visit from His Grace Bishop Ilia and the children had the opportunity to listen to his grace filled words in the sermon after the Divine Liturgy for three consecutive weeks. We have had also the opportunity to expand a little more deeply on the concept of Peer Pressure and how it affects the lives of our youth both positively and negatively. The children have been very active and participating in lively discussions in the class, giving concrete examples from their daily lives. We shall continue to expand on this theme but we'll also be getting ready for the Christmas program. In the weeks to come I'll have more details on this and ask for your kind cooperation.

Important Reminder

Attendance at the Divine Liturgy on Sunday

The parents with their children are expected to be in Church together at **10:00 am** for the beginning of the Divine Liturgy. The regular participation and worship in the Sunday Divine Liturgy is the basis for and essential to the spiritual formation and growth of every Orthodox Christian. It is in the Liturgy that we encounter Christ from the heart. In the Liturgy the Word of God in hymns, prayers and movement is communicated to the soul. Regular participation in the Holy Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist (Communion) is essential. But that implies a daily preparation during the week in order to receive the Holy Communion in a "worthy manner". Prayer (both personal at home and communal in the church) is the quintessential means for preparing ourselves to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. **Thus it is essential that the children arrive in time for worship and remain in the church (not in the classrooms) during the whole Divine Liturgy.** The more they participate in the liturgical life of the Church, the more familiar they'll become with it and this will help them later to experience more fully the Divine Liturgy. It is in the Holy Sacraments that we directly experience God and are filled with His grace. Nothing can substitute this experience. In the Sacraments we know God, in the religious school we learn about God. These are complementary to each other and not exclusive.

We ask the parents to make every possible effort to enable the regular participation in the Divine Liturgy on Sundays.



In the Community

Projects

The Christmas Program!

This year I would love to extend the invitation to ALL the children of St. Nicholas church (regardless of the fact that they participate or not in the Religious Education) to be part of the Christmas Play.

Please reach out to your friends or relatives who have children age 4-14 yrs. Invite them to be part of this wonderful project!

For further info, please contact me via email or leave a message with the church office.

We read in the Old Testament: **“Therefore, you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”** (Leviticus 20:7). Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ said: **“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect”**. (Mathew 5:48). St. Athanasios, a great Father of the Church has written in his wonderful book “On the Incarnation”: **“God became man, so that man might become god”**. We are called to become by the grace of God, everything that God is by nature. These and countless other examples, clearly show the “destiny” of man, of every Christian and not of just a few “chosen ones”. And this is also what we call “theosis” or “deification” – man becoming a “god by grace”. Having said this, I would love to get back again to our “subject of the saints” because as we saw it is related to each one of us and because the saints are those who have become holy, who have “fulfilled” this Divine commandment in their lives and who can also help us to fulfill it, if we may express ourselves in such a simple way. Thus, we have answered our question of how we are related and why saints are important to us. All of us together with the saints belong to one family, God’s family. Since we are “siblings” it would be more than natural for us to nurture a desire to know these “family members” and have a personal and direct relationship with them. We build this relationship as we might do with every other human relationship. We spent time and get to know each other. We read their lives in order to know them better and learn from their example; we might have icons of our “favorite” saints at home (like with every human relationship there will be saints that will feel closer to us, because of their personality, circumstances in life or other factors and they will become in a sense “close friends” to us) and converse often with them in prayer, asking for protection, advice, and even comfort as we do with other friends in our lives.

Who is a saint? I’m pretty sure that to each one of us will come to mind several examples of great Saints that we celebrate in our Church life. However, if you’ve ever had the chance to read a few lives of the saints, the first thing that you might notice is that saints are each one of them unique, as it is every human being. They come from every social class and country. The saints are men, women, children, highly educated or simple, monastics or married, rich or poor, young or old, some of them being raised in the church and the Christian way of life from childhood and some of them having accepted Christ later on in life. They have had all different kind of professions and different paths in life. They have been tempted and suffered, they have sinned and repented, and they have gone through pain and sorrow in life, but also experienced joy and peace. In this sense, the saints are “ordinary” people, just like the rest of us (if there is any “ordinary” thing about a human being). But though the saints are so varied and unique, there is a thread that connects them all: Love for God. And here lies that “extraordinary” quality that makes someone a saint. **All the saints have nurtured in their lives an extraordinary love for God.** And I would love to emphasize here the word “nurtured”. In this sense, love for God is not an innate quality that some fortunate people (the saints) are born with and others, “unfortunate ones”, no matter what they do can never have that quality. But in another sense, I believe that love for God is truly an innate quality of man, being created in the image and likeness of God. We were created for fellowship (friendship) and communion with God and this relationship cannot exist other than in the context of a mutual love. Thus what we call here “extraordinary” in fact is the most natural way of relating to God as a human being; we are created to love God “with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind”.

But living in a fallen world and being fallen creatures, this “most natural relationship to God” does not at all come natural and easy; it requires a lot of struggle with the passions that fight within us and above all it requires the grace of the Holy Spirit. And here we might see the wisdom and deep meaning of why the Church Fathers have appointed the first Sunday after Pentecost as the Sunday of All Saints.

It is the Holy Spirit that transforms a sinner into a saint. Without the Holy Spirit working within us we can never achieve holiness, no matter how much we try. This does not mean that our efforts are superfluous. Our daily struggle to fulfill the commandments of Christ, to wage war against the passions within us, to purify our hearts is indispensable for our sanctification. All the lives of the saints are a living proof of such truth. Nevertheless, our sanctification is primarily the work and gift of the Holy Spirit, which means that what God accomplishes in each one of us is infinitely, incomparably greater than any effort of ours.

Our sanctification is accomplished through what the Fathers have called “**synergy**”, which means a cooperation of man with God, though as we said above not in equal terms. God is the highly skilled surgeon and man is the sick patient. What the surgeon does for a terminally ill person in order to save his life is far greater and more important than what the patient can do. However, without man’s cooperation with the “surgeon” the operation (our sanctification) cannot take place and man cannot be saved from the claws of the illness. Thus man, when realizing that he is very sick, makes himself available to the physician by going to the hospital, allowing various tests to be performed, agreeing to get operated and laying on the surgical bed to get the surgery, following the advice of the doctor and taking any prescribed medication. The surgeon has the skill and the knowledge necessary to heal a person, but on the other hand the person cannot be healed unless by making himself available to the surgeon and actively working with him for this healing.

The above is a very simple example of how the “synergy” or cooperation between God and man works. Our Church is a hospital for the souls of men – as many Fathers have described it – and in it we find the cure for every malady of the soul, for every passion that is besetting us. Fasting, prayer, Holy Communion and all the other Sacraments of the Church are the indispensable medicines that we should use in order to be cured. We should surrender our sick will to the perfect and holy will of God, by fulfilling His commandments. And we shall notice that the “healthier” we become by using properly these God given “medicines”, the more naturally the love for God and neighbor will blossom within our hearts, and a little bit by a little bit we shall resemble the saints more and more with each passing day.

The will of God is the sanctification of man, but on the other hand no one will become a saint by necessity.

We become saints through nurturing a genuine love for God and neighbor. Thus we start the way of sanctification with love and because of love and end it with a deeper love. I mean that we do everything because of love for Christ; we pray, we fast, we give alms, we practice the virtues and try to fulfill His commandments out of love for our Lord Jesus Christ. “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in my love.....” John 15:10. And the fulfillment of this journey is a deeper love and intimate communion with God, is a deep friendship with our Lord. “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.” John 15:14. **Becoming a saint means becoming a “friend of God”.**

May the Saints of the Lord guide us through their prayers on our path toward holiness!

Religious Education Program Staff