

What is a Saint?

What is a saint? - A very good question! Everyone has an opinion on this subject and the opinions can differ widely, especially depending upon ones background and upbringing - Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox.

The word "saint" comes from the Greek word "agios" which basically means "holy, sacred, pious, or consecrated to God". Many of us cling to the notion that a saint is somehow "other-worldly", that it is something definitely beyond our reach - - that it is impossible to be holy. But God says: "You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 11:44). And our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ reminds us that "with men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible". (Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27) In other words, sainthood is something that each and every one of us should strive for with the help of God.

In the Orthodox Church saints are those who have been "deified." Saints are men, women and children who have followed the teachings of the Lord and who have truly acquired the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Almighty God has filled the saints with the light of divine Truth. The Fathers of the Church have compared the saints to links in a golden chain, united in faith, works and love with those who have gone on before as well as with their brothers and sisters still on this earth.

Essentially then, a saint is anyone who is in heaven, whether he or she is recognized here on earth or not, which is why on the first Sunday after Pentecost we celebrate the Sunday of All Saints, remembering all of those who have entered into the glory of God but are unknown to us here on earth.

Adam and Eve are saints, being brought out of hades by the Resurrection of Christ. Moses, the various prophets of the Old Testament, the angels and archangels are all given the title of "Saint".

Not all saints have necessarily led exemplary lives. Remember that no one is without sin except for Jesus Christ Himself. Saints are not the opposite of sinners. There are no opposites of sinners. There are only saved sinners and unsaved sinners. Thus "holy" does not mean "sinless" but "set-apart", called out of this earthly life to the destiny of eternal glory with God.

There are many examples of people who lived in great sin but through humility and repentance ended up as saints. For example consider St. Mary of Egypt, St. Moses the Ethiopian, and don't forget St. Dysmas, the repentant thief who was crucified with Christ. Therefore a true definition of what a saint is would have to include their humility, their repentance,

and their love of God.

But how do we know who is a saint? God reveals His saints through various means among them being answered prayers and miracles. The holiness of someone is sometimes revealed through the condition of their relics (bodily remains). Occasionally, when a body has been exhumed for some reason, something miraculous occurs: the bones give off a sweet fragrance, or the body is free of decay after having been buried for some years in the ground, in spite of the fact that it was not embalmed. (Although a common practice in the U.S. and Canada, it is more traditional in Orthodoxy to not embalm the dead.)

The reason why relics are considered sacred is because a person is made up of both body and soul and, in the end times, the body and soul will be reunited. Therefore, the body of a saint shares in the holiness of the soul of the saint and is treated with reverence. Every consecrated altar in every Orthodox Church contains relics of saints. The priest celebrates the Divine Liturgy over the relics of saints which have been sewn into an antimimension (“in place of the table – altar”) which represents the tomb of our Lord, and the tombs of the Holy Martyrs of the early Church.

Because in the Church there is no true distinction between the living and the dead (we speak of the blessed repose of our departed loved ones), the saints are certainly considered to be alive in heaven and we refer to them as if they are still alive, for example, asking them for their prayers and intercessions. They are also our special friends and teachers. Orthodox Christians are called to become familiar with the lives of the saints, especially our patron saints.

Saints, of course, are venerated but not worshipped. Only God is worshipped. However, the saints are believed to be able to intercede for our salvation and help mankind either through direct communion with God, or by personal intervention.

So, how do we become saints? Not by thinking about it or talking about it or writing about it, but simply by doing it, following in the footsteps of Christ. The time comes when the “how” question stops and we just do. If a loved one is at our door knocking, do we wonder how the door lock works or how we move our muscle to open the door? Christ is knocking at our door. Will we answer?