

6-30-19 Memory of Saints of North America

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

It's good to see you all again. You may not know it, but I just got back from my annual family vacation. I'm rusted and excited. The choir sounds familiar, but wonderfully new as well, as did the young men's chanting group last night. All of your faces are familiar to me of course. But they're a little bit new as well. When we get a break from our normal routine, we often, or should have the goal, to come back refreshed, renewed, ready to go back to work, but with a renewed zeal and love for what we do. And I think it's appropriate today we will see, as God allows me to weave them together, that we are celebrating the memory of the saints of North America today. One of my favorite days of the year.

We also have from the Gospel this account of Christ wandering along the coast of the Sea of Galilee finding his apostles there. They are fishermen. If you don't know how to fish, you're going to have a hard time catching people, so I would suggest that you do. Those of you who know me know that one of the ... If I'm not here at the church, where I want to be is some wild place out in the Sierras finding fish, dragging along with me my beloved family. And I thought a lot when I came back, and I thought about the saints of America and how we are this people who are called to be out in the wilderness. We are called to be places that other people fear to go. But it is there that we find Christ. It's there where we find ourselves. It's there where we break away from the norms that we take for granted and we see ourselves more clearly. This is why Christ goes out into the wilderness after His baptism in the Jordan River. This is why so many of those saints retreat into the wilderness to find Christ and to find themselves.

So we have to get away, we have to take a break sometimes. And I am very grateful that you allow me to get these breaks. I think it's important to say publicly that one of the great struggles among the Orthodox Church, particularly the Orthodox clergy in America, is that their churches do not support them getting rest. They squeeze every last thing out of them, and when they dry up and fall over, they wonder why, and then they get a new one. And they do it again. That is not our local tradition, thank God and thank you, due to your dedication and good stewardship. So I owe you a public thanks for the rest that I am able to attain at times. There's an old saying in the Orthodox Church that a rested priest is a good priest. So thank you for helping me be that way.

When I was on the river long enough, and in the woods long enough that I really started to relax, I started re-reading the Reverend Doctor Deacon Stephen Muse's book *Being Bread*, which I recommended to you on Pentecost. We are to be this bread that is to be shared, having been kneaded through Lent and baked through the Paschal Season. We are here to be shared. Obviously the saints of America are those who shared the faith that had been nurtured in them. And in his very first story in the book, which is really a story book, but then an opportunity for reflection as well, he talks about the fact that he sort of judged this priest when he went to another teaching because always, when the priest got up to talk to the people, they started with a joke. And I realized I didn't think I'd ever done that before.

So I'd like to start today with a joke. I'm not better than my brothers. And I think that it might apply. I hope that you find it as fitting and funny as I do. So one time there was this atheist, and he was wandering in the forest as well. And he came to a beautiful river, and the water was

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flowing, and the birds were flying by. He looked at all of the beauty that was there, and he started rejoicing in himself that how amazing it was that evolution had accidentally created all of this variety and all of this beauty. And he was admiring it all. And then he looked down the bank of the river, and he saw that there was a bear. At first, he was happy to see the bear. But then suddenly, he realized more acutely than he had that he was alone. And then he noticed that the bear saw him as well. And he thought, "Well, maybe I will start going this way, and hopefully the bear will go that way."

But as he went this way, the bear went this way too. And as he began to walk faster, the bear started walking faster too. And suddenly he panicked, and he broke into a run, and the bear came running after him as well. And he couldn't outrun the bear. And he looked back and it was closer, and he looked back and it was even closer. And he looked back and he tripped and he fell on his back, and he looked up and the bear was coming down on him with claws and teeth. And he screamed out spontaneously as so many people do in our nation, "Oh God, help me!" And the bear froze. And the birds stopped flying. And the river ceased to flow. And the heavens opened, and the voice of God was heard saying, "Yes, you have called upon me?" And the atheist said, "Well, yeah. But it's kind of awkward." And God said, "What can I do?"

And he said, "Well, I don't really want to die, but it's sort of awkward because I've never believed in you, and I kind of called on you accidentally. I didn't think you were going to appear, and how you're here now, and. But I don't really want to die." And God said, "To not die, you must become an Orthodox Christian." And the atheist said, "Well, that's sort of strange. I mean, I haven't believed in you all along, and now I'm going to exchange my life for believing in you, even though I didn't really come to that decision freely." And he said to God, "How about if instead of me becoming a Christian, you make the bear a Christian." And as God always does, He says, "Let it be done according to your will."

And the heavens closed, and the birds start flying again. The river begins to flow, and that terrifying bear that's leaning over him relaxes. And this wonderful loving presence comes over it, and it folds its hands, and it bows its head. And it blesses the man, saying, "Oh Lord, our God, bless this food and drink of your soul." I'm glad you got it. I was descending a 7,500 foot pinnacle that I had hiked with my sons, and I told that joke, and they laughed very hard. It was very appropriate.

What in the world does that have to do with saints of North America? Because we always encounter God in the wilderness. Sometimes it's literally the wilderness, like Saint Innocent of Alaska. Finding out that there were two angels up on the mountain that were talking to the one of the shaman of the tribe who had prophesied his arrival. They even called him by name. When he showed up on the shore, the natives came down to the boat and they said, "Oh, Father Innocent, welcome." He'd never been there before. The angels told him, the angels told them that he was coming. Saint Herman did not leave Valaam Monastery in Russia because he didn't have a wilderness to be in. I have been to the place where his cell was, and hopefully will return there this summer. He had enough isolation. He had enough privacy. He had enough of everything needed in order for him to pursue God, but he wanted to go out into a different wilderness to do the will of God, and he did.

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One day, Saint Herman was faced with a tidal wave that was coming to destroy the villages on the island, and in faith, he goes down. He's not facing a bear, he's facing a tidal wave. That's actually worse. And in faith, he goes down to the shore with an icon, and he walks back and forth on the shore. And the tidal wave parts and the islanders are spared, because he was there on the beach in the wilderness with them. Saint Raphael of Brooklyn, Saint Sebastian of Jackson, whose glorification I was able to participate in, literally wandered this country looking for the people that God wanted them to save.

Christ wanders on the shore, and He finds His apostles. Christ wanders from synagogue to synagogue, teaching and healing the people, and He accomplishes what God wills in His life. And as Americans here, Orthodox Americans, we have to realize, we are in a wilderness. We are not alone as Orthodox Christians. Russia is full of Orthodox Christians. We are not alone as Orthodox Christians. Greece is full, Serbia is growing, Bulgaria is full. We're not alone. But we are on the front line. We are the seals of this glorious fight to bring salvation to the world. This is our land, and we need to be claiming it in the might and in the faith of these great American saints who deemed it worthy to come here to save us. Saint Nikolai of Serbia, Saint Herman from Valaam, Saint Tikhon, Saint Innocent, Saint Peter the Aleut coming down and having his life ended sacrificially in San Francisco. This is our back yard. It's not a very pretty one, but it is our back yard.

Whenever I'm in San Francisco, I think of the fact that that city was found worth in the early days to receive the first martyr in America with the Orthodox Church. That that terrible city, I don't like it at all, was a place where Saint John was able to be holy. A place where Saint Innocent traveled to. A place where Saint Sebastian was born. We are called to very difficult places in order to do great things. And so, in this season that we're in of the Pentecostal season where we have celebrated the memory of the birth of the church, the Holy Spirit empowering the people to spread the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we have to be embracing that. Sometimes we have to go out into the wilderness in order to rest, to have the energy to come back and do the work. Sometimes we're going into the wilderness because that is where God is calling us to be. The wilderness of our own home and family. The wilderness of our job place, where we see the people every day and yet, are we a light of Christ to them?

And this is not a guilt trip. I don't want any of you feeling bad about this. We just have to embrace it. We are to be a light to the people that God gives us an opportunity to encounter. I had a wonderful encounter on my trip with the owner of the hardware store in the little tiny town where we go. Her family's owned the business for 71 years. She's a Christian. And I went there a lot to buy fishing tackle or other things that I had forgotten. And by the end of the 10 days, and she remembered me from the past, we were talking and having a good time. There's a lot of wonderful single women in this little town, so I gave her my card and said, "I have a lot of single men." I'm working for you guys. And I gave her at the end an icon. And when I got home, there was an e-mail from her thanking me for the time that I'd taken to just be a part of her life. I don't know what God will do with that seed, but I want to plant it.

So when we look at the great saints who we're remembering today, Saint Herman, Saint Innocent, Saint John, Saint Nikolai, Saint Peter, Saint Raphael, Saint Sebastian, and all the rest, and the ones known and unknown. When we talk about the American saints, one of the most

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important things we need to say is that we pray to all the saints, we glorify all of the saints, we remember all the saints known and unknown. We don't know who the next ones are, but we expect for there to be more, because that's the job that we are doing.

And I would like to end today with another story about a man and a bear. It's a true story, not a joke. But it shows, it makes the same point, but in a more pleasing to God manner. There once was a man. If you remember who this is, by the way, tell me. I can't remember. I always think it's Elder Sampson, but I don't think it is, and I couldn't confirm it. There was a Russian elder who was in the Communist prison system. I think it's Elder Sampson. If you remember the story, raise your hand and remind me. And one of the things they did in the Communist Gulag system, one of the way they got rid of a lot of people, they had these trains. The prisoners referred to them as death trains. And the train would have a lot of boxcars on it made out of wood, maybe for supplies and cattle. That's how it was designed. Big, big cracks between the boards that they were constructed out of.

And they would load these trains with prisoners, and then they would take them across the frozen deserts of Serbia, I mean, of Siberia. And it was so cold, and the boxcars were uninsulated, that the people on the outside of the group in each of these boxcars would freeze to death. And they would make a stop, and they would throw off all the frozen bodies. And then they'd continue on. And the people in the center would stay alive the longest, and maybe make it to the destination of the next prison they were going to be put in. But the people on the outside of that group of people, as it grew smaller and smaller, would die from exposure. And every time they would stop, they would throw off the bodies into the snow and continue on. And eventually, this elder froze, and they threw him off the train, thinking he was dead.

And as you can imagine, especially for an outdoorsman, everywhere you're dumping hundreds of pounds of meat, the animals are showing up to eat. They've thrown them off the train, he's in this pile of bodies. And after the train leaves, from out of the woods come the wolves and the crows, the buzzards, to eat the bodies. And in this crowd of animals comes this gigantic Russian grizzly bear. And the elder sees him come and he thinks, "Lord, I survived the death train. And now I'm going to be eaten by a bear." And the bear is continuing to approach him. He can't move, he's almost dead. He's hypothermic. They thought he was dead. And the bear gets closer and closer, and like the atheist, he cries out, "God, save me!" And the grizzly bear comes, and it stretches out its body, and it surrounds him, and it goes to sleep.

He said later it was the most terrifying and wonderful experience. And he said he was terrified and just thinking, this is my part, "Maybe God has a sense of humor after all." Really? I survived the train, and now I'm surrounded by this 1,500 pound bear. It's sleeping, probably just taking a nap because it walked a long way and it wants to sleep before it eats. And I'm here in its belly and its arms. But eventually, the warmth of the bear around him overtakes him, and he's been hypothermic and he can't help it. And as terrified as he is, he falls asleep. And he wakes up hours later when the sun is shining because the bear is getting up, and the bear stretches and gets off from around him and goes off into the forest, never having paid any attention to him really at all. And he said later it was the best night of sleep he had ever had. Very aware of his fragility and the closeness of death, and yet so comfortable and warm, and he got up and survived.

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And he was able to hike because of that miraculous event with the bear. He was able to hike to the next town, survived, went on, was assigned to churches, ended his life having served the church. He encountered God in the wilderness, the wilderness of both the land and the wilderness of the heart, wondering what is true, grasping at the faith that we have despite the doubt that exists within us. So let us go forward being people who have faith, who when the bears of our lives show up, we may be scared. It's okay, that's very normal. But when we cry out, we cry out in faith, and God turns us into the lights of this country. The missionaries here, those who are following to the best of our ability as God allows us, in the footsteps of the American saints. We're in the wilderness. Be faithful, and we will meet God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.