

There's a wonderful hymn in the hymnal that we rarely sing.¹

It's got a first and a third verse that never change. And then there are 23 different versions of the second verse.

The 23 different versions are for 23 different Saints days during the year. And these are for the feasts of major Saints, Saints like St. Paul, St. Peter, St. Mary the Virgin, St. Mary Magdalene. It doesn't even include verses for more minor saints like St. Francis, or St. Patrick.

We sang this hymn a lot in seminary because we had 13 services per week, and we'd observe lots of saint's days, and this was an easy hymn to plug into lots of celebrations.

Of course, because of the pandemic we're not singing hymns right now. But even during regular times, we only occasionally use this hymn, usually with the verse for our patron saint, St. Paul when we celebrate his feast day in late January.

But the first verse begins with an important idea:

*By all your saints still striving,
for all your saints at rest,
your holy Name, O Jesus,
for evermore be blessed.*

It's talking about 2 different kinds of saints: the saints still striving, and the saints at rest.

In other words, the saints who are still living on earth today, as well as the saints who are now experiencing heaven.

The technical terms for these two groups are the "church militant" and the "church triumphant."

The church militant shares the same root with "military. The church militant is still engaged in the battle of living life in this world.

The church triumphant has finished their part of the battle, and they are enjoying the victory, the triumph. But both groups are saints.

We sometimes have a problem with this idea. We often think of the saints with a capital "S," as in St. Mary, or St. Paul, or St. Francis, or St. Luke. But we often forget that this title extends to us. While Saint with a capital "S" applies to the giants of the faith, saint with a small "s" applies to all of us.

The word "saint" appears 61 times in the NT, and it's never found capitalized. 61 times in the NT, saint is spelled with a small "s." Saint is the word used for Christians, for members of Christ's church, for those who are part of the Body of Christ. That means that all of us are saints. It also means that all of us are called to be saints.

¹ Hymn 231/232.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I often don't feel very saintly. I know I fall far short of the example of the big Saints with capital "S's." I also know that I fall short of the example of God's many saints with small "s's." There's a real paradox here. I'm one of God's saints, yet I'm often not very saintly.

Almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther summed up this condition we find ourselves in in the phrase, "Simul iustus et peccator." It means, "Simultaneously saved and a sinner."

We are God's holy ones, God's saints. Yet we are also broken and sinful people. Our salvation is both already completed and something we're working toward. Our state of sainthood is both already given us in all of its fullness, and yet something we're continually growing into. Our sainthood is both a gift and a goal.

Our sainthood is less about achievement, and more about our calling. We are called to be saints, we are called to be God's holy ones.

On All Saints Day, we remember all of the saints who have gone before. We also celebrate all of God's living saints, all of us who simultaneously have become and are becoming God's saints.

Of course, being and becoming saints is never easy. Very few people have understood this as well as St. John the Divine.

In Revelation, John writes of his vision of the church triumphant. He writes of the glory of all of the saints gathered in heaven.

But Revelation was written to the church militant. It was written to Christians undergoing great persecutions. The original audience of Revelation was people who were undergoing great suffering for the faith. The church is often a suffering church who follows a Lord who himself suffered. One of the central images of Jesus in Revelation is as the Lamb, the Lamb that suffered, the Lamb that was slain.

The Christian life is no cakewalk. Discipleship often means discipline. Sainthood often means suffering. The pains of life are very real. Sometimes our suffering stems from our own actions. Sometimes our pain comes through no fault of our own. Life is often a matter of struggle and fighting and slogging through the mire. In 2020, that seems especially to be the case.

But there is good news. The church on earth, the church militant, will one day become the church triumphant.

As the church militant we often have to fight, and struggle, and suffer. But the good news of Christianity is that victory follows suffering, resurrection follows crucifixion, life follows death. The good news of Christianity is that, one day, we will experience the kingdom of God in all of its fullness. We will no longer be a struggling, suffering, fighting church

militant. Instead we will become the church triumphant, the church which enjoys the blessed reward which is promised to us.

We celebrate All Saints Day not only because we are thankful for all of God's saints, both known and unknown, who have gone before us. We also celebrate the sainthood that is given us as a gift from God, a gift that we grow into, often in spite of ourselves. We celebrate the promise that we will be a part of the church triumphant, part of the glorious company of the saints in light.

That is the company which in St. John's words is "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne."

And one day we will join them at the throne. We will join in singing their triumphant and eternal song:

"Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever."