

On this wonderful feast of all saints, one of the elders in the first reading asks: Who are these wearing white robes? The answer comes: These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress.

Christians know all about times of great distress. The killing of the holy innocents. The Roman persecutions. The torturing of missionaries. Life under communism. Or even, for us, the violent gang epidemic in our town.

How are we to survive this great distress, out-live it, deal with and resolve it? We are to promote family life ... so that children don't have to go around looking to create their own families, based on silly childish values. We are to meet with others and pray, strategize ... and deal not only with prompt punishment for misled people but a changing of the situations where such foolishness takes root --- weak families, accompanied by insufficient good substitutes for families --- not enough youth groups, athletic programs, soccer fields, libraries, promoting literacy so kids can have thriving school experiences.

And to keep ourselves spiritually on target, so we don't despair and become just another part of the problem ... Jesus offers us the beatitudes. He says: Blessed are the merciful, the meek, the gentle, the forgiving. Blessed are those who don't go along with the group, even if they're insulted or threatened.

To which someone might say: "Jesus, are you kidding? You're a fool. Easy for you to say." And Jesus says: Easy for me to say? I was crucified in front of my mother. I saw my "faithful" disciples running in terror. Real life is not easy. But it's real, and you can survive the great trial, and end it.

Are there gang members in heaven? Fr. Patrick Dooling replies: "Let me ask this again: Are there people now in heaven who once killed, stole, dealt drugs and extorted? Who at the last moment of their life maybe, remembered Jesus crucified and his sorrowful mother, and turned to them for mercy. Of course. And now they see things as Jesus does ... and if their voice could be heard they would say to their brothers and sisters now struggling: Don't be a fool. Very soon, whether you die at 19 or 90, you are going to see God as he is. You and God, face to face. What others think or say or threaten will mean absolutely nothing. What matters is heaven and hell, and heaven begins (with how you live life) now."

Or, to paraphrase Fr. Jim over in Spreckles: Jesus did not so much complain or condemn evil as point out, in the Beatitudes, how to live lives so powerfully good that evil was pushed out of the picture.

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We are not alone in this struggle. We have the presence, intercession and support of the saints --- the powerful cloud of witnesses that survived their great distress in every age. As we process through Church, we'll chant a litany of the saints to deepen our solidarity with them and enlist their aid.