

There were two men, both of them hanging from crosses, both were dying in anguish, and both of these men were on their crosses for the same reason: they were both criminals being crucified for their crimes. One of these men, however, was a saint, the other was not.

It's not that the one had committed fewer crimes than the other, stolen less, been less violent in his criminal activities. No, their sinful pasts would have been identical. No one, looking up at them from below, would come to the conclusion that: Yes, the one was a saint, and the other was not. In fact, the onlookers would be absolutely certain in concluding that neither man was a saint, that both of these criminals would end up perishing in hell.

This is still how the onlookers in the world think today. The world prides itself in being able to identify who is a saint, and who is not; who will be saved, and who will perish.

The world, however, sadly ignores Jesus and His cross, the very cross that divides these two criminals. What separates these two men is not what they have done in the past. It's Jesus who divides them. The one turns to Jesus, and the other does not. To the one, therefore, and not to the other, Jesus gives the promise of Paradise.

In the Apostles' Creed we confess: "I believe in the Communion of Saints." What does a saint look like? Well, the world has its way of identifying saints. But we in the Church are not of the world. "I believe in the Communion of Saints," we say; not "I see."

There is no gigantic S on the chests of the saints, as if God's saints are Superman and Supergirl. And even if there was such an S, it would stand for Sinner as much as Saint.

I suppose that is one of the best ways of identifying the saints. Look for sinners. And not just your mediocre sinners. Look for wretched sinners; poor, miserable sinners. Like the criminal hanging on a cross. Don't look at the chief priests and scribes looking up from below his cross and Jesus' cross. They are the ones the world would call saints. Yet they are no different from the other criminal. For neither he, nor they, look to Jesus. They look at Jesus, but not to Him for salvation.

That is why the one criminal is a saint. He turns to Jesus in his dying hours. His past life cannot keep him out of Paradise. Heaven is for sinners. For sinners like him. Sinners who look to Jesus for salvation.

In Revelation 7, the elder questions John about the multitude gathered before God's throne. "*These are the ones,*" he tells John, "*who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*" And we can be absolutely certain that every one of those robes, before they were washed, were absolutely filthy.

Is being saved that easy? As easy as turning to Jesus for salvation? As easy as washing a dirty garment? Yes. "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.*"

But if being a saint, living as a saint, and dying a saint was easy, then all those clothed in white robes would not have “*come out of the great tribulation.*” It is tribulation, great tribulation, to live as a saint. Because of temptations to sin? Yes. Because of persecutions against the saints? Yes. But even more, because of what we confess in the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in,” not “I see,” “the Communion of Saints.”

I, for one, do see a gigantic S both on my heart and on my forehead. Now, others are fooled when they look at me. Others think that S stands for Saint. But I know better. I know the S stands for Sinner.

We do not confess in the Creed: “I believe in the Communion of Sinners,” because sinners we can see. We see our own sins. We feel our sinfulness. But we do not see our holiness. We see that we are sinners, but we must believe that we are saints.

And that, my friends, is not easy. This is why all of God’s saints in Revelation 7 who are clothed in white robes have “*come out of the great tribulation.*” It is our daily struggle not only to fight against temptation, but to believe that when we fall into temptation, Jesus still calls us His saints.

And you know why? Because right after we confess: “I believe in the Communion of Saints,” we say, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”

There it is. There is the blood of the Lamb in which we wash our filthy robes. We do not wash our robes in our holiness, for we have none of our own. We do not wash our robes in our works, for our works fall short of the glory of God. The saints of God wash their robes in the blood of Jesus. They are the “Communion of saints” because they believe in the “forgiveness of sins.”

Are you a saint? Let me take you to your baptism into Christ where the sign of His bloody cross was placed both upon your forehead and upon your heart marking you as one redeemed by Christ the Crucified. That is the cross that divided the two criminals. And that is the cross that marks you as God’s forgiven saint. Your baptism does not lie. And your baptism assures you that the robe you wear is washed in Jesus’ blood.

Are your sins great? Yes, they are, so are mine. You do see a huge S labeling you as a wretched sinner. But look to your baptism into Jesus. See His cross placed over your sinful life. He declares you His saint. He declares your sins forgiven. Jesus is your holiness, your covering, your beautiful white garment.

Live as the saint that you are. And living as God’s saint, you will go through great tribulation. But always turn to Jesus as did that saint on a cross. Believe that your sins are forgiven, for you too, are part of that great multitude washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. Amen.