

Willan West Celebration Mass November 17, 2018

Commemoration of St Gregory the Wonder Worker

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- All Saints' Episcopal Church, San Diego, CA

Mark 11:22 *“Have faith in God”*.

Three men died and came to the pearly gates. St. Peter was waiting and proceeded to ask them a question:

“Imagine that you are lying in your coffin and you can see people above, come to pay their respects. What would you like them to say?”

The 1st one said, That I was a good man who did no harm to anyone, a loving husband and father.

The 2nd one said, That I was a faithful member of my church and did a lot of charitable work.

The 3rd one paused.....I would like them to say, Look, he's moving!

November is the month when the church remembers the departed. It begins in All Saints Day, when we commemorate all those saints in every age whom the church honors. Then on November 2nd comes All Souls Day - the day when we remember all the faithful departed, especially our own departed loved ones. Beautiful Requiem Masses are celebrated on All Souls Day and many composers have written beautiful music for a requiem. Sadly, Healy Willan never finished composing a requiem. By contrast, many of his compositions have been dedicated to saints. The most well-known, of course, is his Missa de Sancta Maria Magdalena. Tonight we have his Mass of Saints Philip and James.

The Communion of Saints is part of Christian doctrine, belief and devotion. In the Apostles Creed it immediately follows “I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church”. It is a logical consequence of belief in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Catholic Church and is a central teaching of the Church.

We know all about the Blessed Virgin Mary, St Joseph and the Apostles, but not so much of the myriad others. Some are well known and popular, like St Francis of Assisi. Some are in living memory. Growing up in Australia, I was aware of the New Guinea Martyrs - Anglican priests and missionaries who were killed by the Japanese rather than desert their flocks. I met people who knew those martyrs.

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But what about those relatively unknown? Chances are you have never heard of St Gregory the Wonder Worker! That's not surprising. He lived in the 3rd century and was bishop of Caesarea. When the church calendar was revised 50 years ago he was removed, along with other notables, such as St Christopher, St Katherine of Alexandria and St Margaret of Antioch. All of these had improbable legends told about them. In the case of St Gregory, he was supposed to have stopped floods and moved boulders. That is why the gospel for this Mass refers to faith working wonders.

The most interesting thing about Gregory is that when he went to Caesarea there were just 17 Christians in that city. When he left, there were just 17 pagans - he had reversed the order of things! Wouldn't it be a wonder if our modern bishops could do that!

Why, then, finish up this excellent year-long Willan festival celebrating an obscure saint who is not even in the calendar any more?

In honoring Healy Willan we are experiencing wonderful music that he wrote for worship in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. Churches like All Saints maintain this tradition and that includes the music. Through such music we discover how warship inspires us and the music lifts our hearts and spirits to the throne of grace.

But, of course, if Anglo-Catholic worship was just about music, vestments, ceremonial - and all those other things we associate with it - it would just be a matter of taste. No matter how beautiful the music, there is more to it.

As well as inspiring us and helping us to worship and pray, worship in the Anglo-Catholic tradition also teaches us the faith. Healy Willan knew this. The Masses and motets he composed were top draw our attention to Jesus and his real presence in the Eucharist.

Tonight, as we celebrate an unknown saint, we are proclaiming that core doctrine of the Communion of Saints. At every Eucharist we are in the presence of the saints. At the heart ion the Mass, b before the Sanctus, the celebrant says: "Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company off heaven".

Yes, here is the gate of Heaven. Here we have a glimpse, a window. Who can doubt it when a choir sings a marvelous setting of the Sanctus?

Christ's Holy Catholic Church is not just you and I. It is not just Christians throughout the world. For we are united with all the holy ones of every generation as they worship in Heaven. They urge us on. They know our ups and downs of life

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- for they have had theirs. And so they pray for us.

The saints remind us that the Church is a community. It is alive now. It looks back to the past. And it looks forward. For one day we hope to join those holy ones.

I doubt that St Gregory could move boulders to stop floods. But I do think he was a wonder worker in converting the city of Caesarea. And I have no doubt that the most wonderful thing he did was to celebrate the Eucharist from his people.

Tonight's final offering of wonderful music by Healy Willan reminds us that here at the altar is pure wonder. For the Eucharist is full of wonder, and for christians it is an experience of wonder that we do not get anywhere else. It is truly called the most wonderful Sacrament.

Blessed and praised be Jesus Christ in the most holy Sacrament. Hosanna in excelsis!

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