**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey**
**November 1, 2026**
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**All Saints' Sunday**
**St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento, California**

Happy All Saints Day, everybody. I've found that preaching on this feast I have to choose from an embarrassment of riches. I've preached, or tried to, on the Beatitudes. I've preached on that wonderful line from the 28 prayerbook "We are very members of the mystical body of Christ, the blessed company of all faithful people." One day I hope to preach on our wonderful All Saints Hymns. But this year, it was the various visual images I've seen of the Communion of Saints that haunted me most. The Ofrenda; the pictures and paintings drawn from the reading from Revelation; and a particular image, the room sized icon of the Communion of Saints at St Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco.

Let me say that I love our Ofrenda. I love seeing Phyllis Onachyk smiling out at me again. I love the chance to commemorate my Mom and other relatives. And I love taking a moment to remember those who aren't pictured but were part of our family and are still dear to us. The most important thing about the Ofrenda is the chance to remember those who've gone before, and to set them beside other more famous Saints as a reminder of where we're going.

But I got curious about the parts of the Ofrenda that I'm not familiar with, like the Marigolds, the custom of setting out food, and the monarch butterflies you sometimes see. I didn't consult Professor Google, I asked Senora Google instead, Luisa Navarro, who has online instructions on how to create an altar and what the elements mean, speaking from a deep knowledge of Mexican traditions.

It turns out that most of the elements trace back to a single idea, that over the All Saints/All Souls Day period, the ancestors leave heaven or purgatory and return to earth for a visit. The marigolds are usually built into an arch, and their bright color and strong scent help the dead find their way. The pictures reassure them that they've come to the right place. They are hungry and thirsty after their long journey. So people put out water and bread, and also sodas or favorite drinks and sugar skulls. All of these things welcome the dead as one might welcome a guest. Finally, the monarch butterflies finish their long migration in groves of trees in the Mexican mountains. They always arrive on All Souls Day and are thought to represent the dead on their journey. On a fall walk in Iowa, I once saw a large group of monarchs resting on a bare tree, slowly folding and unfolding their wings. It was a wondrous and unearthly sight.

I guess some might be uncomfortable with what seem like pagan elements, but they don't directly contradict Christian ideas about the destiny of the dead. I was moved by Senora Navarro's idea that Ofrenda is intended to welcome the dead, who have come to visit and bless us. Our flowers, offerings, pictures and candles bless them in return.

Now we turn to today's reading from Revelation, which has had an outsize influence on depictions of the Communion of Saints. John the Seer, also known as John the Revelator, is one of most visual, even hallucinatory, authors in the Bible. The Book of Revelation first gives us a picture of the great tribulation on earth, then takes us through a series of visions of the heavenly places. Today we have come close to the throne of God, which we saw earlier was surrounded by angels, the four living creatures, and the elders. Now we see a great multitude "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." Though they come from every place and people on earth, they are all dressed alike in white, and all carry palm branches in their hands. One of the elders tells the Seer that these are the ones who have come through the great ordeal. They suffered terribly under the Empire of the Beast, but now they are in heaven, where God will wipe every tear from their eye. John leaves us with a picture of a vast multitude, all dressed in glistening white, surrounding the throne and worshipping God and the Lamb.

When I looked at the Christian tradition depicting heaven and the Communion of Saints, it often draws on this image. God and Jesus are at the center, and a multitude of people, all nearly identical, surround them. As time moves forward, artists add color to the saints' robes. The image on today's program is beautiful, but also fun, because the saints all appear to be dressed in togas. My problem with these images is that the saints all look alike. I understand that John was trying to convey that even though tribulation was coming, the Saints survive it and join in worship in the heavenly places. He wasn't concerned with their individuality.

Modern and post-modern images of the Communion of Saints often do depict the Saints in all their individuality. My very favorite example of this draws on the long tradition of icons, but shows saints from all tribes and peoples and languages, and even many religions, in the dress particular to their time and place. That image is found at the church of St. Gregory of Nyssa on Potrero Hill in San Francisco.

Before I tell you about the image, I need to acquaint you with the architecture and liturgy of St. Gregory's. Sunday service is conducted in two different rooms. As I recall, the liturgy of the word takes place in a rectangular room with facing rows of seats, which works well. It's a common monastic

arrangement, and long ago, the choir area here was like that. When its time for Communion, you file next door into a large round room, with the altar at the center, and form a circle around the altar. Communion is celebrated in the round. There's an intimacy to it because you can see the faces of those around you as well as the altar. Those of you who've been to noonday mass or the old 8 am mass have experienced some of it. When Communion is over, the real difference begins. The entire congregation dances in a circle around the altar. Think Greek or Breton folk dance. At one time dancing was part of the Orthodox liturgy, and Gregory of Nyssa was very fond of it.

As you dance, the icon above you begins to make sense. Up high on the circular walls, larger than life saints are dancing with you. Within a large mandorla, Christ leads the dance, holding a processional cross. When I was there, Christ had yet to be painted. The Saints really are from everywhere and every when. One juxtaposition I particularly remember is Queen Elizabeth I dancing beside Malcolm X. Even though she is in one of her wide, stiff dresses, and he is in modern gray pants and coat, they look right together. I also remember Rabbi Seraphim of Sarov dancing with a bear, and St. Francis with a wolf. While you're dancing, there isn't time to figure out who everyone is, but the message gets across. They dance, and we dance. We are worshipping with the Saints in Heaven, who are as much individuals as we are.

I hope these three representations, the Ofrenda, the throng of Martyrs in Revelation, and the room size icon at St. Gregory of Nyssa, enrich your ideas about the Communion of Saints and how to feel part of it. I admit that of the three I love St. Gregory's the best. I'm going to close with a quote about St. Gregory's, from Rev. Fabian, but it could also be about the Communion of Saints here and in every church. "When you walk into the church, you're supposed to feel an affectionate gathering of people overhead—a gathering that you belong to. This is the truth about the universe. This is all of us."