Dear sisters and brothers in Christ: Christ is among us!

This past week at our adult education class we had a lengthy discussion about our destiny as Christians, as those people who follow Christ Jesus. This was spurred, in part, by our father in faith, Bishop Alexander’s homily last Sunday, the Sunday of All Saints. And today we celebrate all the saints of North America. It’s important to note that last Sunday and today we honor all the saints who have lived here and live among us, those known to us: the ones whose names we see on our church calendars, as well as those known only to God: those who are in heaven who don’t have their names written down in a book of saints but who nonetheless are saints.

In our discussion we spoke about one of the ways the devil tempts us. He tempts us to see saints as perfect persons, like a perfect statue: persons who had no faults, never said an angry word, never committed a sin. The devil tempts us this way because he wants us to give up and say, “What’s the use? I could never do that. I never could become a saint.” This is a lie. It is a lie because it comes from the devil. Jesus tells us of the devil that “he was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:44) The devil uses lies like this to lead us to despondency and apathy, in the hopes that we will give up the struggle to live our life in Christ.

The saints struggled with temptation, temptations from our fallen human nature, from the fallen world and from the devil. And the saints were sinners. They sinned. Whether it was Saint Mary of Egypt who abandoned herself to lust as a young woman or St. Silouan of Mount Athos who nearly killed a man in his youth because he feared the young girls would laugh at him if he gave in to the drunkard who came after him. If that is where their lives ended, their stories would be lost to us. But they didn’t end there. St. Mary of Egypt repented, she turned from her sin and struggled with temptations in the desert. St. Silouan became a monk and struggled with despair. He continued the struggle until his death in 1938 and in 1988 he was glorified as a saint, one set apart, who is in the heavenly courts at God’s throne.

These are but two examples of people, just like you and me, who struggled with their own thoughts, with their own sinful inclinations and did so until their last breath. They lived lives of repentance, of daily turning away from sin and turning to face the Savior and walk in the light of the Holy Spirit present within them.

All of us are sinners. We pray together the Communion prayer written by St. John Chrysostom: “I believe, O Lord, and I confess that Thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Who camest into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first.” These words are from St. Paul who called himself the chief of sinners. St. John was not exaggerating in this prayer. He was not speaking about others. He wrote the prayer for himself. He knew his sins and called himself the first of sinners. And we honor him as one of the greatest saints. We make his words our own, humbling ourselves before God by confessing our sinfulness. But the prayer doesn’t end there. We continue speaking to God saying, “Therefore I pray Thee: have mercy upon me and forgive my transgressions both voluntary and involuntary, of word and of deed, of knowledge and of ignorance. And make me worthy to partake without condemnation of Thy most pure Mysteries, for the remission of my sins, and unto life everlasting. Amen.” We ask God to make us worthy to receive Him in Holy Communion, in the bread and wine now become His Body and Blood. It is by our coming into union with God through Holy Communion, through our prayers, through our good works, that we go beyond our sinfulness and instead make room for the Holy Spirit to work in us.

As St. Paul tells us today, it is God who shines in our hearts, “but we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.” (2 Corinthians 4:7) We are fragile pottery that can shine with God’s light so that the glory is not ours but God’s. This is how the saints lived. Aware of their sins but confident in God’s mercy. They strove to turn away from their sins and live with charity towards others, in the joy of the Spirit, messengers of God’s peace, striving to be patient, struggling to be kind even to their enemies, looking to see only the good in others, not their sin, not judging them, being generous and gentle with others, modest, in control of themselves and chaste according to their state in life, whether celibate or married, monastic or lay. Where the saints are, the ones we see in these icons, that we read about, whose names we know and whose names only God knows, this is where we are to be. They stand at God’s throne interceding for us, cheering us on in our struggles against sin, and cheering us to get up again when we fall into sin, as they yearn for us to be with them in the glory of God’s splendor, of His love, because that is what God desires for us: to be with Him, to live in Him, to find our fulfillment with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit here on this earth so that we find its fullness in the age to come. Amen.