

HOMILY

Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed All Souls Day

November 2, 2008 – Year A

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The month of November, and especially All Souls Day (which we celebrate today), is a traditional time for visiting the graves of our loved ones as is the anniversary of their deaths. A German proverb affirms our faith regarding the dead. It says, “Those who live in the Lord never see one another for the last time.” That is to say, we never say goodbye to our loved ones, even when they pass from this world into eternal life.

This is so much truer for me this year as my mother passed from this world into eternal life at the beginning of this year. Though she is gone, she seems to be so near and, at times, more alive to me than when she was here on earth. Death is such a certain fact that it is no longer meaningful to ask WHY? or WHEN? or HOW? We simply have to ask WHERE?

In a sermon shared with his fellow believers in November 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked: “Where are our dead?” and “Where will we be after our death?”
(A Testament to Freedom, Harper Collins Publishers, San Francisco, 1955.)
He had the Book of Wisdom to answer these questions. The Book of Wisdom affirms that *“they are in the hand of God...they are in peace.”*

*“But the souls of the just are in the hand of God,
and no torment shall touch them.
They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead;
and their passing away was thought an affliction;
and their going forth from us, utter destruction.
But they are in peace.”*

(Wisdom 3:1-3)

“They are in peace” helps to soothe the pain of those who mourn—mourn the fallen soldiers, mourn the untimely death of a child, mourn the untimely death of a spouse or of a parent. Those words bring some comfort to the survivors of this world’s hatred and ethnic cleansing and catastrophes. *“They are in peace”* may

help to mitigate the shame of Darfur, Tibet, Afghanistan, Iraq, Congo, Vietnam, and many other places like them because many, many innocents of these places are with God in peace.

This is the unshakable hope that our faith holds out to the world. If we cannot hold aloft this faith, then we as a Church are a bunch of hopeless people. “If there is no eternal consciousness in a human being...what would life be then but despair? If this is the way life is, there is no sacred bonding uniting mankind...it is as if the human race passes through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless whim. If this were so, how empty and devoid of consolation life would be!”

(Søren Kierkegaard: *Provocation*, The Plough Publishing House, Farmington, Pennsylvania: 1999)

Yet even the most unshakable hope harbors a tinge of doubt about those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith. One may ask, “What about those whose signs of faith were not so well marked? How have they fared after dying?” St. John answers that question gazing at the dying and the risen Jesus, who he says *rejects no one*. Jesus does not lose any one of us. That is what we proclaimed in the Gospel extract of today.

It is here that we should remember the famous saying, “Death is the gateway to heaven.” I remember reading it in Latin for the first time on the arch-gate of an Old Dutch cemetery no longer in use in Visakhapatnam in India. On the moss covered arch was written, “*Mors Janua Vitae – Death is the door to life.*” Those about whose signs of faith we tend to have doubts are, in fact, simply farther along on their journey to life, to heaven, than we are. They are at the gate of life and of heaven!

That is the reason why in the Church and among the Jewish people, and among all those who have faith in God, the commemoration of the departed is a very sacred day. “*Remember us, who have gone before you, in your prayers,*” is a petition often found inscribed on the walls of the Roman catacombs. (Lumen Gentium-50)

According to Revelation 21:27: “***Nothing unclean shall enter heaven.***” Wisdom 7:25 tells us that “***nothing defiled gains entrance into her.***” Isaiah 35:8 reads, “***A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.***”

Holy Scripture teaches that even “*the just sin seven times a day.*” How then would we reach our destiny? Since it would be contrary to the mercy of God to keep such souls out of heaven (should that be in hell?) we Catholics believe that they are entering a place or state of purification called **Purgatory**, which combines God’s justice with his mercy. They are the saints at heaven’s gate. They need to be helped by our prayers to get in there faster!

Some modern theologians suggest that purgatory may be an “instant” purification immediately after death, varying in intensity from soul to soul, depending on the state of each individual. According to this view, the refining fire of purgatory is only a relic of medieval imagery. It may, in fact, be a form of “blazing enlightenment” which penetrates and perfects our very being. God can anticipate and apply the merits of our present and future prayers for the dead, in favor of the souls we pray for, at the time of their purification. Purgatory is, therefore, “the fringe of heaven,” a state where heaven’s eternal light has a refining effect on the “holy souls” (not “poor souls”) who are held in the arms of Divine Mercy.

Rooted in ancient Christian tradition, as witnessed by Tertullian in the 2nd century A.D., St. Odilo of Cluny established a memorial of all the faithful departed in 988 A.D. Rome accepted it in the 13th century. An Apostolic Constitution of Pope Benedict XV in 1915 granted all priests the privilege of celebrating three Masses on “All Souls Day” for the following intentions: one Mass for any particular intention, another Mass for all the faithful departed, and a third Mass for the intention of the Holy Father.

Why did the Church develop a tradition like this? Christ, raised on the cross in his supreme sacrifice to the Father, draws all men unto himself. The faithful departed marked with the sign of faith and the faithful who are not so well marked with that sign are all lifted up to the Redeemer through this one single sacrifice. How beneficial then the practice of raising our loved ones who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith in that very sacrifice of Jesus repeated day after day in our Churches? St. Augustine remarked that he used to pray for his deceased mother remembering her request: “When I die, bury me anywhere you like, but Remember to pray for me at the altar.” They pray, “**Remember us who have gone before you!**” We respond with that life-giving sacrifice today and every day!