

Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed
All Souls Day
November 2, 2014
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 6:37-40

It is clear from the history of the saints that one does not have to live an entirely holy and virtuous life on earth to be canonized after death. So, for example, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was Catholic for only the last fifteen years of her life, but her time in the Church was well spent. She founded a religious order and became the mother of all Catholic schools in the United States in a mere decade and a half. Other saints lived worldly, even profligate, lives. St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, fantasized about attaining glory through combat before his conversion; and St. Augustine of Hippo fathered a child out of wedlock with one of his mistresses before he became the greatest theologian since St. Paul, who, by the way, was a murderer before his conversion on the road to Damascus.

My point is that a life of sanctity is not required in order for the contrite sinner to receive the mercy of God. Indeed, St. Paul writes in the Epistle today that "...God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." We don't receive mercy because we have lived a holy life; we receive mercy in spite of our lack of holiness. Jesus Himself answers us in our Gospel today that "...everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

My emphasis today is that bit about "everyone." I started with the saints to demonstrate clearly that notorious sinners can make it into heaven, but today is All Soul's, the day the Church dedicates to those who have passed from this life, but who are still on their journey to the Throne of Grace and the beatific vision. That is, we must anticipate that at the end of time there will be many people in heaven that we didn't necessarily expect to see there. They aren't saints. They're still in purgatory now. But they saw the Lord Jesus and believed that their sins were washed away in the Blood of the Lamb. And Jesus said, "and him who comes to me I will not cast out."

So here's the reality: some really nasty people are being given the opportunity to make reparation for their sins though they have already passed from this life. We here make the distinction between the eternal consequence of sin and the temporal punishment due to sin. The eternal consequence of sin is hell, eternal separation from God. When we are baptized or absolved in the Sacrament of Penance, that penalty is remitted. We will not suffer hell if we repent of our sins and are baptized or go to confession, no matter how late in our earthly lives this repentance occurs. Deathbed conversions are real, and even the most wicked will find that their sins are less powerful than the mercy of God.

But what of the man who spends his days as a parasite, neglecting to use the gifts God has given him while at the same time depriving others of their gifts, through violence, robbery, murder, deceit? Does he get to go straight to heaven, as long as his contrition on his deathbed is genuine? Is there no consequence at all for his profligate life, for the injustice he perpetrated against the innocent, God's own children? The answer to both these questions is a resounding no. He does not get to go straight to heaven. He will suffer consequences.

This is what the Church calls the temporal punishment due to sin, and it is the primary reason that the Church designates black as the official liturgical color for All Souls. Those who have not fulfilled their penance on earth will be required to do so in the life to come. Black is a reminder that a good number of the faithful departed are not in heaven yet, that our mourning for them should spur us on to pray for them, and that their suffering is real.

In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to these souls in purgatory as the Church Suffering. The saints in heaven are the Church Triumphant, and we Christians on earth are the Church Militant; but the Church in purgatory is the Church Suffering. They have been assured that they will receive the inheritance of the saints in light, though it is not yet theirs, as their wills grow in closer and closer conformity to God's will, and as they bind up by their prayers the wounds they caused by their sins while they yet walked the earth. Thus, they do not suffer eternal separation from God, but they suffer nonetheless.

The good news for them is that their suffering may be ameliorated, even alleviated, by the prayers of the faithful brothers and sisters on earth. November is the month the Church designates as being especially appropriate to offer prayers for those who have gone before us, which means we are to use these thirty days by offering devotions that lessen the time the redeemed spend in purgatory, that lessen the time of their purgation, their purification.

As we offer these prayers, our attention naturally drifts toward those whom we knew and loved personally, our family members, friends, and fellow parishioners. But the challenge posed to us on All Souls Day is that word "All," reminiscent of the "everyone" we heard in the Gospel from St. John. Our concern can't be only for the ones we think deserving, or even only the ones we know loved us in word and deed. We must desire also to lessen the pain of those whose conversions came too late, of those whose suffering is all the more profound because they never did any reparation on earth.

In this we can look to the saints for inspiration as well, because they tailored their ministries on earth to reach both the penitent and impenitent, those making reparation and those for whom reparation is a foreign concept. Consider St. John Eudes, who founded in 1641 the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Refuge, an order designed to help prostitutes who sought to escape that life of death. His concern was for those who live, as Pope Francis has said, "on the fringes," as so many before and since. Our concern for those on the fringes must not be only for those still among us. Our charity must extend to those in purgatory who need our prayers, who are learning now what they neglected on earth. So offer Mass intentions, but also seek out indulgences, which the Holy Father has the authority to grant through his power, first given to St. Peter, to bind and loose. And apply these indulgences to the holy souls in purgatory. By our prayers and Christ's merits we will speed them to heaven and in so doing win for ourselves patrons who know the importance of repenting before the very end.