

**THE FEAST OF ALL SOULS—A—2008****NOVEMBER 2, 2008****FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.****WISDOM 3:1-9****ROMANS 5:5-11****MATTHEW 5:1-12A**

If you consider some of the oldest churches in Rome: St. Agnes, St. Sebastian, St. Cecelia, St. Lawrence to name but a few, you realize that very early in our Christian history we honored those who had come before us in faith and held them in special esteem for the way in which they lived their lives and met their death. None of these early saints went through the process we call “canonization” today. It was the faithful who proclaimed them holy, and who on the anniversary of the deaths of these “saints” came to their tombs to celebrate the Eucharist to remember them in a special way. Eventually above those tombs, churches were built to do the same, and to remind us of the fact that we belong to a Communion of Saints and as part of the Body of Christ we have a special union with the saints who have come before us. Men and women who have faced all the distractions and temptations our world affords, and remained faithful to Christ as their Lord and Redeemer.

Today we celebrate the “Feast of All Souls” while yesterday we celebrated the “Feast of All Saints”. It seems that their very celebration on successive days points to the fact that they are either one continuous feast or at least complementary feasts. In a young country like our own that has only a few canonized Saints, we might find ourselves feeling somewhat separated by time and space from even the concept of Saints. Paul tells us that in the early Church every believer was referred to as “Saint”, but in time that title was given only to the few who went through what is now a rigorous process whereby the Church declares them holy enough to be numbered as Saints. Yet, anyone who has died and who has led a reasonably good life and who will ultimately be united with God is a saint.

This feast of All Souls then remembers all and anyone who has died in the peace of Christ but who has not yet attained that complete union with God. This feast also reminds us not only of our belief and hope that beyond the grave there is a life rich with fullness for all of us, but it also reminds us of the relationship which you and I continue to have with

those who have gone before us. That relationship may sometimes be a very personal one with those that we have loved and those who have loved us, but it may also be a relationship which is ours with every soul that has gone before us in faith because we share the same Father and are brothers and sisters of the same Christ. We are all part of the Mystical Body we invoke and remember them in the Canon of the Mass whenever we celebrate the Eucharist.

Our Reading from the *Book of Wisdom* today proclaims that the “Souls of the just are in the hands of God.” It means that although none of us have actually experienced it we believe in faith that after death there is more, a great deal more than nothing. It means that once God has loved each of us into being we never cease to be. For those who have loved God that continued life is fuller and richer than anything we can imagine since we live in the secure and loving hands of God. This belief takes us beyond grief for those we have lost to the consolation that we like our family and friends who have lived a life of faith will be one with them and Him if we too live that same faith.

This is the hope that Paul speaks about in today’s Reading from his Letter to the Romans. Christ so loved us that He poured Himself out for us, as the ultimate proof of the Father’s Love for us. In Christ reconciliation is ours, and with that reconciliation come that life of unity with God that is our hope. And, it is a hope that does not disappoint.

In Matthew’s Gospel, *The Beatitudes* form the first part of that very long discourse known as the Sermon on the Mount. In a sense, these *Beatitudes* are the core of Jesus’ teaching and represent the interior attitude that calls for a continual conversion and radical transformation of our lives. The *Beatitudes* make it clear that God’s ways are not our ways. They call for a reversal of common sense. What we as human beings seem to desire are an abundance of “things”, control over others and over our own lives, and power to make all things ours. But, the Wisdom of God found here tells us only the poor in spirit come to share in the Kingdom of God. We want to avoid pain, and to maximize our pleasure, but Jesus says that if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we will find consolation. We do not like being overlooked or not appreciated, but Jesus tells us if we are humble we will share in His Kingdom. We want to be filled with all the world offers, but the Lord counsels us to hunger for holiness and thirst for justice. Our hearts are scattered and divided and happiness seems to elude us, but the Lord says with single-minded pure hearts happiness is ours. Peacemakers, unfortunately, are seldom held in

high esteem. Both sides of a conflict seem to pay them little heed, but Jesus says they are the ones who most truly imitate the Father and do His will.

In these *Beatitudes* we find not only the essence of Jesus' teaching, we also find the essence of Jesus Himself. The one who will be persecuted and who through His Death will give us life. In the *Beatitudes* we find the makings of the "saints". All of us know just how difficult it is to wrestle with the values presented by Christ in the *Beatitudes*, those presented to us by His very life: values that seem to go against our grain as human beings who ordinarily think first about ourselves. Just as we have struggles so too have those who went before us. Our hope is that in their struggle they have learned the value of self-giving.

Those who have gone before us are by no means all anonymous strangers; they are our mothers, our fathers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters. Unfortunately the celebration of this Feast has often been seen as one of mourning, but it should not be. It is a Feast that celebrates the hope we all hold for eternal life. It is a Feast which really comes down to our basic beliefs. *Do we believe in Jesus the Son of the Father, the Anointed One, the Messiah who came to save us? Do we believe that through His Passion, Death, and Resurrection He has saved us from death? Do we believe that in Him we find New Life as do all the faithful who came before us?* This is not a feast about death as an end but as a beginning. It is not about mourning; it is about rejoicing. It is not about fear; it is about hope.

Henri Nouwen in his, *A Letter of Consolation* put it, I think, most beautifully:

The friends of Jesus saw Him and heard Him only for a few times after that Easter morning, but their lives were completely changed. What seemed to be the end proved to be the beginning, what seemed to be a cause for fear proved to be a cause for courage, what seemed to be a basis for despair proved to be a basis for hope. Suddenly a wall became a gate, although we are not able to say with much clarity or precision what lies beyond the gate, the tone of all that we do and say on our way to the gate changes drastically.

As we celebrate this *Feast of All Souls*, we stand together with Peter and John, and Mary Magdalene at the open tomb on Easter morning; we stand with all those early Christians who came to tombs of Cecilia, Lawrence, Agnes, and Sebastian, and we stand with every

**family that comes to mourn a loved one at a grave or Columbarium. We may not know with the “clarity or precision” that we as human beings prefer, but we come with a faith and a hope that what lies beyond that gate is well worth celebrating.**