

All Saints' Day / All Souls' Day

This year we have an unusual weekend with All Saints' Day falling on Saturday followed by All Souls' Day on Sunday, so different liturgies on these two days. Both of them of course have to do with what happens after this life. These two feasts have been celebrated back to back like this in the Catholic Church for many centuries and, as I'm sure many of you already know, this is where the name Halloween gets its origin, from All Hallows' Eve, coming the evening before All Saints' (Hallows') Day.

And so our readings this weekend should cause us to reflect on the next life – as should the readings the next few weekends as we come to the end of the liturgical year which ends with the feast of Christ the King. The first reading on All Saints' Day comes from the Book of Revelation, that mysterious final book of the Bible, filled with all kinds of symbolism and strange visions. The vision that John has in this reading includes two vast groups of people: he says the first group consists of “144,000...from every tribe of Israel,” and

the second of a great multitude “which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue.” All these people together are giving worship and praise to God in heaven. The earliest Christians of course were predominantly Jewish. The number 144,000 is, like so much of the Book of Revelation, symbolic: representing the twelve tribes of Israel, multiplied by 12, and then multiplied again by 1000: it represents a vast but not an exact number of people who come from the 12 tribes of Israel. And then the vast multitude which no one could count represents all the Gentiles, that is, all non-Jewish peoples, who have become followers of Jesus Christ and believers in the one true God throughout the ages down to the present and to the end of time when Jesus Christ returns.

The reading also says that these people have “survived the time of great distress” – this is a reminder to us that this life is marked by suffering. Suffering is inescapable in this life, but because Jesus

came and suffered and died on the Cross, he has “redeemed” suffering if you will – He gives it meaning; it becomes an opportunity to grow in holiness, to grow closer to Christ. Suffering is also the surest way of demonstrating love for others: Jesus’ own suffering and death are the greatest expression of his love for humanity. And when we sacrifice for others, we show that we truly love them: if there were no sacrifice or suffering involved in our love for others, our apparent love for others could just be a cover for trying to get our way or to get something from others to our own advantage.

The Gospel reading on All Saints’ Day is the Beatitudes from the Gospel of Matthew. Most of the Beatitudes refer to some kind of future reward. For example, “Blessed are they who mourn, for they *will* be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they *will* inherit the land.” All this is another reminder that this life is not all there is, that how we live our lives now will determine our fate in the next

life. And it's a reminder that God will reward us in heaven for the good we do in this life and for our efforts to become more and more like Him. Being humble, showing mercy, being peacemakers, and even being persecuted "for the sake of righteousness" – all of these bring the promise of a future reward.

Our final goal of course is not to be found in this life: it's not to amass a lot of wealth, or to achieve some kind of perfect lifestyle, or to lead a life of total leisure – as alluring as these things sound, deep down we come to realize that having the perfect life here on this earth always remains out of reach, and we all know that this life doesn't last forever, and that we can't take our possessions or our lifestyle with us. So our true goal of course is to be found in heaven: eternal life, in which we will come face to face with God Himself and rejoice and worship and praise Him forever. Because we can't really imagine or visualize what this will be like, we always have to ask the Lord to keep increasing our faith so that our hearts always

remain fixed on our true goal. And that is to become saints, to join all those men, women, and even children who were open to God's grace while in this life and who have died holy deaths and who are now with him in heaven. And on this feast of All Saints we honor all those saints – known and unknown – who have already begun their eternal life with the Lord in heaven.

But then the very next day after this joyful solemnity of All Saints, we have the rather more somber feast of All Souls. The white vestments get replaced by purple, or even black for those who have them. I think it's pretty easy to get on board with All Saints' Day, because it's all about the saints rejoicing forever in heaven: that sounds pretty good. But All Souls' Day might be a little more challenging because it reminds us that unfortunately we don't all shoot straight up to heaven when this life is over. Certainly some do: those who have lived holy lives of heroic virtue and died holy deaths, those who have died for their faith in Christ, and so on. But

in order to come into the presence of God, our souls must be freed of all worldly attachments, and especially all sinful attachments: in other words, we must be completely purified and perfected in order to behold the face of God. How many people when they die are already in this state? Only God knows, but for all those who are not yet purified and ready to come face to face with the Lord, there is a state of purgation or purification – not a state of punishment however – known as purgatory through which they must pass to prepare them for that state of eternal happiness with the Lord.

As with so much that lies beyond this life, there is little that we can say definitively about purgatory. We don't know exactly what it is like; we don't know how long it lasts – is time there similar to time here, for example. I think much of the way purgatory is described is really metaphorical. A couple things that we can say about it definitively though: because it is a state of purgation and purification, it involves some kind of suffering. That's because any

kind of purification is by nature challenging and difficult. Anyone who has ever exercised or dieted or tried to do anything challenging to become a better person can attest to that. Whether it lasts a long time or momentarily, again, we do not know, although certainly the purification involved depends on the state of the person's soul. But we can also definitively say that purgatory is only temporary – it is not a final stop – and that all those who go there will one day go to heaven. That is what purgatory is for: to purify us so that we can enter God's presence. So even though it's purgatory, it still gives us reason to hope, because heaven is the certain reward.

And so we have the feast of All Souls, in which we remember and pray for all those who have gone before us who are experiencing that state of purification in preparation for entry into heaven. We can and should pray for them just as we pray for one another. They are in need of our prayers. And we can and should ask for the saints to

pray for us and for the souls in purgatory just as we ask one other to pray for us.

“The souls of the just are in the hand of God” – so it says in the first reading of All Souls’ Day from the Book of Wisdom. That is what God has created us for, to be with Him, to rest with Him and worship Him for eternity. Let us ask the saints in heaven to pray for us who remain here on this earth and for those who are in purgatory so we might all one day enter into that state of eternal beatitude with our loving, Heavenly Father.

- **November 1-2, 2025 at St. Mary’s, Spring Lake**