



Commemoration of all the faithful departed / All Souls' Day



Date: Wednesday, November 2, 2016 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Wisdom of Solomon 4:7–15

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 25:6, 7b, 17–18, 20–21 | **Response:** Psalm 25:1

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:51–57

Gospel Acclamation: John 11:25a, 26

Gospel Reading: John 11:17–27

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Technically we call today the “Commemoration of all the faithful departed” but it is popularly known as ‘All Souls’ as a play on words of yesterday’s ‘All Saints’. In yesterday’s feast of All Saints, the Church around the world honored the Church in Heaven (though in South Africa we shall celebrate it this Sunday). Today we commemorate the Church in Purgatory—the deceased faithful who are on their way to Heaven. Their present period of purification will infallibly end, we believe, with their seeing God and becoming united with the other saints in adoring Him. The Church believes that Purgatory has only one exit – Heaven. The vast majority of us will need to spend some time in Purgatory. I had a Jewish friend at University and he used to tell me that his understanding of the Catholic’s ‘purgatory’ was like a ‘cosmic washing machine’. Perhaps that’s not a bad thought. Whilst we believe there are many countless Saints in Heaven – and I’m sure each of us could point to one or two people we have encountered whom we would describe as Saints... there are still countless more who are destined for Heaven but who did not die as Saints and so could not immediately gain admission. We would all need to be ‘cleaned’ (in this metaphor) a little, or a lot, before entering Heaven. But the question of salvation or damnation is made before entering Purgatory. This, therefore, is not a day of mourning; we rejoice because our faithful departed have been judged worthy to be with God.

We might ask, what exactly, is a soul? In Sacred Scripture the term “soul” often refers to human life or the entire human person. But “soul” also refers to the innermost aspect of man, that which is of greatest value in him, that by which he is most especially in God’s image. We believe that a soul is the spiritual principle of human beings. The soul is the subject of human consciousness and freedom; soul and body together form one unique human nature. Each human soul is individual and immortal, immediately created by God. The soul does not die with the body. We believe that the soul is separated from the body by death, and is reunited with it in the final resurrection. Today we pray for all those Souls awaiting that reunification.

We believe that the human body shares in the dignity of “the image of God”: it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit.

The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the “form” of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.

The Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God—it is not “produced” by the parents as the body is—and the Church also teaches that the soul is immortal: it does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final Resurrection.

Many of us have signed the book in front of the altar – and if you haven’t I invite you to please fill that book in, submit your Pious List envelopes and we will offer our Masses this month for these intentions.

But what of the readings? The three readings for today offer consolation to the bereaved and hope for the final Resurrection. Each reading presents us with a different scenario. The first, from the Book of Wisdom, addresses the tragedy of one who dies too young. “Being perfected in a short time,” the writer argues, “he fulfilled long years” (Wis 4:13). Though this may seem small comfort to the bereaved, it was a standard argument among the rabbis. In the reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul confronts the reality of death with prophetic proclamation instead of carefully reasoned arguments. His theme is the victory over death that is

ours now because of Christ. “Where, O death, is your victory?” he asks, paraphrasing Hosea. “Where, O death, is your sting?”. This is the Christian perspective with which Jesus challenges Martha in today’s Gospel.

The raising of Lazarus draws us into Jesus’ inner circle. This family is beloved of Jesus. It is impossible to miss the thinly veiled reproach in Martha’s greeting: “Lord, if only you had been here ...” But this is not a bereavement call. Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, comes to make present the glory of God. And so in the face of death, he asks Martha as he asks us, “Do you believe this?”

As we celebrate today – we must confront the same question – do we believe in the Resurrection? If we do, then today is a day of celebration – because the resurrection that is due to All the Souls in purgatory can also be ours.

Let us make the prayer of the Church our own when we pray: “for your faithful, Lord, life is changed not ended, and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven’.

Let us also pray for the faithless departed – that God’s mercy might prevail.

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