

The Feast of All Souls: Remembering the Faithful Departed

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a sermon to seminarians,
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When I was growing up, in an Irish-Catholic working-class parish, the feast of all souls and the feast of all saints were just as important as Easter and Christmas. I was taught that the feast of all souls was the feast-day of all the saints that the bishops and the big-wigs will never know by name. But we know their names, and so today we honor them: it's a very solemn duty. It is right and just, I was taught, it is a good and holy thing, to pray to our friends who have died, asking them to bless us with the gifts and the graces that shaped their own lives.

On this feast, the deaths we have grieved in the prior year are officially promoted, so to speak, into the list of names that make up our own personal litany of the saints. Let us pray to Helen, that we may share her confidence that ordinary people can make the world a better place. Let us pray to John, that we may develop his ability to make people smile. Let us pray to Mrs. Grant, who lived across the street and made the best lasagna in the parish: that we may be as generous as she was with both time and love. And let us pray to those who died in the Pentagon and the World Trade Towers a few weeks ago, that we may learn both patient vigilance and wise restraint from what they suffered. It is indeed a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to remember the resurrection and to tell the stories of these lives.

As I look back on that tradition, it seems a lot like ancestor worship. But on the other hand, it certainly generated the kind of strong community life that contemporary ethical theory finds so very important. Whatever its flaws, it gave concrete expression to our faith in "life everlasting." And it gave meaning to the creedal claim that we believe in the "communion of saints." As St. Augustine taught, "extra ecclesiam non salus est." There is no salvation outside the church

or, more freely translated, *you can't do this on your own. We need one another's help.* Death does not stop the support we offer one another, because death is not the end of life. The communion of saints, the community of the faithful, follow us through life.

When I began my doctoral work, for instance, a woman from the parish I grew up in wrote me a letter. I barely remembered her. But she offered her best wishes and promised to make a novena to St. Jude on my behalf.

St. Jude, patron saint of hopeless causes. I called my mother. "Oh, her," my mother counseled. "She prays to Jude for absolutely everything. She doesn't have a clue. Never has. Say three Hail Mary's to Grandma Murphy, and don't worry about it." I pictured St. Jude and Grandma Murphy facing off in some committee meeting full of guardian angels. Am I a hopeless cause?

But there's a very dark side to the kind of strong and supportive church community. And the feast of all souls--the feast of the "faithful departed"--is an appropriate day to remember that as well.

"There is no salvation outside the church" can also be freely translated, "come to church or go to hell." "Believe and be saved" can translate into "doubt and be damned." Ask the wrong questions and get into very serious trouble indeed.

So let us include among the faithful departed not only the saints we have known but also those who have left the church. Let us include the faithful departed who left because they felt condemned for who they were, for how little money they made, or for what they thought. Let us include among the faithful departed those who left because they ran afoul of parish politics or the insecurities of some priest.

And let us remember that, as the Mystical Body of the Risen Christ, we are called to be a radically inclusive, radically egalitarian community--even though that's wildly at odds with our nature as social animals richly dependent upon strict hierarchy and strong boundaries around our communities.

So what are we to do? How are we to cope with the contrast between who we are as social beings and who are called to be as the communion of saints? We are to wait for the Lord like watchmen in the night, today's psalm tell us. We are to remember how little we understand, how poorly we can see, how easily we give way to our fears. The feast of the faithful departed is a very good day to remember that the churches do not have franchise rights for marketing God presence in this world. God comes to everyone like the light of the morning, a light we cannot comprehend, and a light we do not control. As November gives way to Advent, keep track of how often the coming of the Messiah is associated with the coming of light into our darkness.

Let us continue to hope and to watch for that light. And let us always remember that the communion of saints includes not only the famous saints and the not-so-famous saints, but also many of the "faithful departed"--the many good and holy people who have walked away from this fallible human community we call "the church." And let us remember that the Lord does not keep track of what is done amiss, and the morning always comes.