

Sunday November 2, 2008

Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (All Souls Day)

All Souls Day has its roots in the sixth century Benedictine tradition of praying to the dead. It was a way of recognizing the human bonds which go beyond death. By the tenth century this feast was about praying for the dead, that they might know the merciful love of God.

It is appropriate today for us to think about what a soul is. In an increasingly secular society it's interesting to note that the word "soul" persists in ordinary conversation. Many non-religious people use this most religious of terms to describe another person. We often hear how others are lonely, distressed, or lost souls. It can be said that someone has a "beautiful soul" or that a piece of music, a painting or other work of art "stirred my soul." We describe mellow jazz as "soulful" and still alert others to distress by an SOS, "save our souls." These uses of the word reinforce St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching that the soul makes us human, and sets us apart from other animals.

Nearly all the great religions of the world believe in a soul, or its equivalent—something that survives the annihilation of the body in death. I have come to the opinion that whatever else might characterize the soul, memory is an integral part of it.

I have done several funerals of people who have suffered from Alzheimer's disease. These are rarely very sad occasions because the family invariably says that they "lost" their loved ones' months or years before. Why? Because increasingly their loved one couldn't remember anyone or anything. We hold to caring for the body from the womb to the tomb, because we believe that human dignity must always be respected. There are now theories about how even the memories of the circumstances of our conception and birth have a bearing on the way we live our lives. It is also apparent that even when people seem to have lost their memory, or are unconscious, that there is some recognition of some things at a very deep level.

Soul as memory means that when I meet God face to face, I will remember who I am and how I lived, and God will remember me. It's also a comfort for us to think that we will be reunited with those we have loved who have died before us, because we remember each other.

And what is best about a "remembering soul" is that it is purified. In the old catechism we used to say that heaven was the place where we are perfectly happy with God for eternity. If we think of purgatory as a stage rather than a place, then it's possible to reclaim it as a moment when we see the fullness of God's sacrificial love for us, and recall our sometimes destructive behavior toward ourselves, others and the world. Purgatory can be a moment where our memory is purified so we can be eternally happy with God in heaven.

So let's remember at this Eucharist all those "departed souls" we have known and loved over the years, that they might pray for us that we never forget God's saving love and live lives worthy of it.

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