

All Souls
November 2, 2003

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 25:6-9
Romans 6:3-9
John 6:37-40

Those who live in the Lord never see each other for the last time.

All Soul's Day - isn't this the day when we pray for the dead, visit cemeteries, remember the beloved with gratitude? Yes, and especially in some countries and cultures, this is even more observed; it is a great piety. Some say that we should pray to them, not for them. And the belief in purgatory is not held by all Christians. For us Catholics, we believe in the communion of saints - those along with us who are on pilgrimage to the kingdom, those who are in a state of purification for the kingdom, and those who are in a state of glorification already in the kingdom. It all speaks of our journey as Christian people.

A miniature version of that journey is our journey each week to the table here at Mass - a sign of the journey that we make every day in other places and times.

It was not good to present purgatory as a place of punishment for sin for so long, even like a kind of hell. A lot of bad sermons were given along those lines. Purgatory not as a place, but as a condition of preparation or purification for the ultimate vision of God...yes, that is what we believe. We prepare for an important dinner or meeting or reunion in this life - think how we prepare for a wedding. As one theologian described it, it's like tossing pebbles in a pond - those ripples, those eddies, are caused by all of our good deeds and bad deeds, and it takes a while for all that to

be resolved. Hence, the transition from this life into the life to come. We can influence those who have died - we can influence them by our prayers, and they in turn can influence us. Hence, the communion of saints we celebrate.

There is a key belief of ours that we lose only our limitations when we die. It is our belief that, in death, we lose nothing of what is good in us...but what is good is made perfect, and only what is weak passes away. What will it be like when we find ourselves in the next life, in the company of those we avoid today? Today, we may choose not to associate with people who are different from ourselves, but we cannot take bigotry into heaven with us. Then, there are those with whom we can find no common ground today. What will happen to our cherished opinions when we find ourselves with people we disagree with? We may hold tight to our opinions today, but we cannot take arrogance into heaven with us. And finally, what about those whom we dislike with a passion? People who have harmed us or have harmed those we love, people who have betrayed us or abused us...will they be there too? Our God of mercy may make it so. There may be people whom today we dislike to the point of hatred, but we cannot take hatred into heaven with us. No, God will see to it that we lose only our limitations when we die. And some sort of transition will take

place from this life into the life to come.

We are right to pray to and for people we have loved and lost, who are surely home with God. Yes, and to think of them as present. We're not talking about ghosts or the stuff we just heard over Halloween. We mean a real presence, like the sacrament of Jesus' presence. In fact, it is our belief that in the Eucharist, we are close to those who die and now live with the Lord, closer than we were in this life, but in a way which lies yet hidden from our faces. If we are all in Christ through our baptism or through acts of love in this life, then "What can separate us from the love of Christ?" Nothing, the apostle said, nothing in life or in death. Nothing at all.

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each other for the last time.