

All Saints, All Souls, and a Catholic Understanding of Death

Thirteen years ago, I went with my class in seminary to Rome. We had the chance to tour quite a bit of churches, but one was pretty unique. It's known as the Capuchin Crypt, or Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini, AKA the "bone church."

In this small church, when you go below, you can enter a narrow space, and view bones. Lots of bones in fact; in some cases a full length skeleton in the habit of a capuchin monk. There is also a sign in front of one of them that says, ominously but truthfully, "you are who we were; we are who you will be."

It might sound a little creepy, but it reflects a truth of society - we try to forget about death as much as possible. And the point of this place is not to make people afraid. Rather, it's to make people think about the reality of our mortality. It would be rather depressing were it not for the fact that we are an Easter people. We believe in a resurrection. But with that also comes a transformation; not just of our own bodies into a glorified body, but the transformation of a soul into someone who is fully loving of God and others. And this transformation, and our connection to one another, is something the Church takes a close look at during the month of November.

November is not my favorite month. Outside it's getting colder; the leaves are gone. I'm no fan of winter. It becomes more gray and bland outside; things are seemingly dying all around us. I say "seemingly" because while the landscape becomes less colorful and the air has a greater chill, the warmth of a new spring will eventually arrive. But that requires patience, and the warmth of the sun which will start making its way north of the Tropic of Capricorn again come late December. There's no way around it though, living where we do it requires patience to get there.

The same is true with us. We are journeying towards heaven; but sometimes due to our own decisions in life, our souls can be quite barren and desolate. We sin, we make bad decisions, we push others away. We are flawed people.

The problem is though we do not like to think about the flaws. It's easier to pretend we are perfect. But the reality is we are all sinners, and all flawed. And that is where God's love comes in. In the saints, his love is seen clearly, and in all of us God's love is there. And that love is a two way street. It requires a reception on our part, being open to saying the prayer of the tax collector, "God have mercy on me a sinner" and it requires us to help one another to become better.

And so with that in mind, what our feast days that start November do is to help us get the right perspective on death, sin, and what the transformation from sinner to saint looks like.

With respect to All Saints Day, the day is to celebrate the many people in heaven who are saints but known to God. There are canonized saints, people who go through a process where the Church looks at their life and with the help of the Holy Spirit

determine that this person loved God perfectly. But there are many others, and these people are known to God. A saint is simply someone who is in heaven. We believe that the saints are close to God. And so we celebrate the fact that there are so many people in heaven to help us. What the saints can do for us is that they can inspire us. We can look to people who have lived heroic lives, some of whom we may know who have been among our loved ones, and be inspired to become like them. They also help us. We believe that as they are close to God, they can intercede for us - and so we can ask people to pray for us, just as we would do so on this earth.

So what of All Soul's Day? This is the following day, and it is a day where we pray for all of our beloved dead. We do this because we believe that there is a journey to heaven.

For some when they die, they have already learned to love God fully; they go to heaven. For some, they may have rejected God completely, and they go to hell, which is the absence of God; hence the eternal frustration of someone who can do nothing to undo a completely closed heart. However, we also believe in purgatory. And as I've noted before citing then Cardinal Ratzinger who wrote on the subject, purgatory is not some type of concentration camp. This is why I'm not fond of the term "poor souls in purgatory" as it implies just that. Rather, it is a process, known to God, where His love purges us of those sins and things we cling to. We can go to confession, and sin is forgiven, but there is still sometimes in us the tendency or temptations to do those same sins again. After we die, God helps us through that so that its permanently removed. Sometimes there is pain in letting go of something that isn't good for us (e.g., a person who smokes might not find it fun to quit smoking, but then free from nicotine is in a better spot). Purgatory isn't a matter of time being served (time is a part of this world, not the next when we are outside of time). Rather it's a "letting go and letting God" point, and so we pray for a person as they go through that process just as we would encourage someone in this life who is trying to kick a bad habit or better themselves.

Both days also remind us that we are connected to the dead, and it's important to have a clear picture of that too. From the good, we can learn so much, and we can ask for help from those who have died and the saints to pray for us. I am still inspired by people like my grandmother Pat or my Godmother Gen to be a person of prayer, to have more patience, and to live by the truth that sometimes I am the only Bible a person will read, meaning I need to be patient, kind and loving towards others. We have so much to learn reading the life of a canonized saint, or thinking about one of the heroes we knew too. It's great to also visit a cemetery and pray at a grave; to go through the family album and share stories of loved ones with children and grandchildren about people they may have never even met so they understand they are alive in the presence of a loving God and not just memories but people they are connected to who will meet one day in God's kingdom.

But, with people who have died, we also need to acknowledge flaws. At this point I've celebrated hundreds of funerals, and in some families there is nagging pain and tension because there is hurt going on in that family. We are there at a funeral Mass to pray for the person in the casket and for ourselves. And that goes on after the funeral too. With

those who have died, we should also pray for them and for ourselves and work through the pains, even the anger we may have towards them. People are human, and humans sin. Sometimes a person doesn't see their drinking problem, their nasty temper, their cold demeanor, that they ignore Mass and prayer, etc. But God does; there's no hiding this from Him. And that would be pretty scary if God was out to get us or took delight in seeing us suffer. Rather, God takes delight in liberating us from our sins, and that will happen after death - so we pray for those who have died, and acknowledge their shortcomings. But we also acknowledge our pain too. So I think it's important to bring things to our prayer life, or to even bring them to Jesus when we receive Communion, and ask for God to help us let go of pain. Sometimes also talking about it with someone we trust, or even a counselor can help too. It doesn't do much good to hold onto anger; Jesus let go of it on the Cross, and we need to do the same.

Lastly, not just in November, but always we need to be comfortable with our own mortality. As humans, we try to control things, and sometimes we think we can control death. Other times, fear can become overwhelming - we've seen some of this during the pandemic with fear and paranoia creeping into some hearts and souls. We cannot control the fact one day we die; but we can take comfort that because of the Son, Jesus, death's meaning is changed forever and with Him, we will arise.

Indeed, like the earthly remains of the Capuchins in that small Rome Church, we will be like them one day - but looks can be deceiving. That might be what remains us of on earth, but we will rise again because of God's love for us. As we journey through this world to the next, let us prepare for it by striving to become better each day through the inspiration and intercession of the saints, and help all of our loved ones, living and deceased, to do the same through our prayers for them.

God bless,

Fr. Paul