

"Triple Play: The Communion of Saints"

Homily of November 2, 2003

by Father Brian Joyce

Triple Play... a triple play. We are far enough removed from the World Series, and we have done our grieving for the Giants and the A's and maybe the Cubs and the Red Sox, and even for the slightly stunned Yankees, that we can use the phrase "triple play" and not mean anything to do with baseball.

This weekend the Church celebrates its triple play or triple header which it has celebrated on October 31st, November 1st, November 2nd, for hundreds and hundreds of years. We celebrate, first, Halloween, or Holy Eve, and then All Saints Day, or All Hallows, and then All Souls Day, today, which in some countries is called "Dia de los Muertos" or the Day of the Dead. And what we are celebrating together is the victory of God, in Jesus Christ, over death and darkness.

We are celebrating Christ's victory over death and we are celebrating what we call the "Communion of Saints." Remember, in the Apostles' Creed, we always said, "I believe in the Communion of the Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?" I believe that our creedal statement, the Communion of Saints, is very key and it is certainly continuous. Christians have shared it for two thousand years. It is recited in the Creed here. It is recited down at Hillcrest Congregational Church, at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, at Resurrection Episcopal Church.... the Communion of Saints, a community of all the people of God, living and dead.

When I was growing up we had kind of three neat packages. We talked of the Church Suffering, the Church Militant, and the Church Triumphant as the Communion of Saints. The Church Suffering was the souls in Purgatory. The Church Militant, I think, was supposed to be all the Catholics on earth at war with their neighbors and everyone else on earth. (Actually, I think we were at war with each other.) And finally, the Church Triumphant was the saints in heaven.

The belief in the Communion of Saints is still very important to us, and key. And I would call it a "sleeper belief" because we say it but we don't think about it and, yet, it has very great importance for our lives and the life of the Church. But, I would say that when we speak of the Church Suffering and the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant, as a matter of fact, you don't hear people speaking about it any more. But the faith in the Communion of Saints continues although the language and the landscape and the context have been somewhat modified. For example, the "Church Suffering" has been modified because the impression of a God who imprisons us and tortures us has been corrected by the teaching of Jesus and replaced by, first of all, a sense of great mystery of life after death. We don't have all the details. We

don't have the blueprints. And, secondly, a sense of gratefulness to a God who welcomes us after death and who prepares us for his kingdom, and whose time, whose hours and days and years are totally different, entirely different from the timing of ourselves.

The "Church Militant" is revised and modified because we don't believe that life is just a jihad or a battle against unbelieving neighbors or a secular or pagan world, but rather we are called to be in solidarity with the world that God so loved that he created and so loved that he sent his only son to redeem it, and that life is a precious gift and also a gift that provides us a journey, an ordeal, and great joy and hope.

The "Church Triumphant" doesn't just mean the saints in heaven with the big names. It is a reminder that all of us are called to holiness, and it's not just the Hall of Fame Christians who have gone before us, people like Mother Theresa or John XXIII or Edith Stein, but rather it is people we have known and loved, people who have touched our lives, that they too are among the saints.

I want to say a few things about the saints and a few things about death. A few things about the saints: It's interesting, in the Bible in the New Testament, people are called "saints" quite a bit. They name saints and communities of saints. They do it maybe sixty-three times in the New Testament, and there is only one thing that is absolutely consistent. When the Bible and the New Testament speak of saints, the one thing all those people have in common is they are not dead. They are all alive, no dead people, the saints in Corinth, the saints in Philippi, the saints in Ephesus, the saints in Pleasant Hill. A reminder, first of all, that we are called to be saints, and that our sainthood is already rooted in the victory of Jesus Christ, which the reading from Romans today said, "Neither death nor powers, nor creatures of any kind can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, that our holiness is rooted not in our perfection, not in our not-needing forgiveness, not in our good works, but in the saving power of Jesus Christ who redeems us. We are reminded of that. It reminds me of the priest who was asked, "Do you think that Dorothy Day, that wonderful Catholic woman who founded the Catholic Worker, who died in New York in 1989, do you think she will ever be made a saint?" And he said, "Oh, Dorothy Day is already a saint. The Church just hasn't caught up with her yet."

Well, we are all made saints already, by our baptism, by the Eucharist, by the redeeming love of Jesus. But somehow we have to catch up with our best selves and who we really are. And the saints that we name include great giants from the past, such as St. Peter and Paul, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Vincent dePaul, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Clare of Assisi, the great Theresas, of Avalon and Liseux and of Calcutta. But they also include people much closer to us than that and people dearer to us, in many cases, our parents, our friends, Msgr. Wade, (The anniversary of his death was yesterday. He served us here thirty-two years as pastor.) Margo Schorno who served us twelve years as associate pastor. And when we celebrate the saints, we celebrate a reminder to live out the lessons we learned from those people, a challenge to grow and be inspired by those people. And also we celebrate the confidence and hope we have in one another, in our faith, and in Jesus.

I want to say three things about death. If you have been to funerals here you have probably heard them because I think they are worth repeating and I usually repeat them at funerals. They all have to do with the kind of God and the kind of faith around death that Jesus Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, has shown us.

The first thing that Jesus shows us is that our God, at a funeral, whether it is the letting go of a little infant who dies so soon or the sudden death in an accident, or a tragic suicide, or a lingering long illness, or the end of a rich old age, our God says, "There's more. It does not end here." Our God says, "I did not create you to end here. I created you to have life and have it in its fullness. There's more."

The second thing that God does for us, (And Jesus teaches us this, and it is wrapped up in fancy words like "justification, salvation, redemption.") Jesus tells us that, from the first flaring forth of creation, our God is bringing us together, bringing us all together, the Communion of Saints, a community of God's loved ones, which means we will meet again. We will meet again.

And the third thing that Jesus teaches us, we have in our creeds. We talk about belief in the resurrection of the dead, belief in the resurrection of the body. That does not mean cadavers getting up and walking around. It means God knows us by our first name and loves us and we are not going to lose our identity. It means when we meet again, we will know each other. It means that our personal relationships, our friendships, our personality and our love will not disappear, but rather will blossom. And we do not have to come back in unfamiliar shapes and forms to work at it again (reincarnation). Nor will we vaporize and disappear into a blend and puree of an ongoing cosmic soup. God knows us by our first name and loves us and we will rise again.

And so we can say to our beloved dead, especially on this weekend, "Until we meet again, go now in peace, faithful friends of God, and take our love into paradise. God's holy angels will lead you home to the wide, waiting arms of the Lord." Amen.