

All Saints Day Mass Honoring St. Jeanne Jugan

At this somewhat melancholic time of year as darkness increasingly replaces sunlight and chill gives way to frost and cold, the Church—now for nearly 1,300 years—has chosen to remind us of what one day awaits us all: death and judgment.

But she does so in a very hope-filled and positive way. Tomorrow All Souls Day offers a reminder that some, even most who have died but are assured of salvation, are unable to encounter the overwhelming radiance of God because of their attachment to sin, the remains of sin that cling to their souls: hence, purgatory. And so through the bonds that join them and us to the Risen Christ, the faithful on earth are encouraged to pray and offer sacrifices for their purification.

Today, however, we honor those who have passed from this life, fully purified and now see the face of God, enjoying what the Church calls the Beatific Vision. In the words of St. Cyprian found in our *Catechism*:

“How great will your glory and happiness be, to be allowed to see God, to be honored with sharing the joy of salvation and eternal light with Christ your Lord and God.”

And there are countless millions of these All Saints enjoying that brilliant vision for which they were created. We had a glimpse of them in our first reading

“After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb... They cried out in a loud voice, salvation comes from our God.”

Surely, each of us has relatives and friends numbered among that great multitude. As we still share kinship with them, so do they, with us. The Second Vatican Council summarized our belief in the Communion of Saints, Catholic belief etched into the very stones of the earliest Christian catacombs:

“So it is that the union of wayfarers with the brethren who sleep in the peace of

Christ is in no way interrupted, but on the contrary, according to the constant faith of the Church, their union is reinforced by an exchange of spiritual goods.”

Those spiritual goods are, primarily, prayer: we pray for the souls in purgatory, we seek the intercession of all the saints in heaven. It is said that the curtains of heaven are transparent curtains. Not that we can look beyond the skies and see the saints worshipping before the Lord. But the saints can look out—and how often, starting with the Blessed Mother, they have done so—they can see us plowing our way through life, periodically doubting, failing and complaining. They help us by the light of their heroic, saintly example shining into our world, encouraging and prompting us to persevering trust in God’s love and mercy. But most of all they help us by interceding for us in powerful prayer sure to be heard, especially when we call upon them in faith.

The oft-quoted words of St. Therese of the Little Flower from her deathbed reassuring her sister Carmelites

“Do not weep, for I shall be more useful to you after my death and I shall help you there more effectively than during my life.”

We are happy and privileged to have with us this morning, for their first time worshipping in this, our historic Basilica (now their historic Basilica as well!), a communal reminder of this ancient belief of the Church, the All Saints Sisters of the Poor, on this their feast day. We warmly welcome and thank Mother Christina and her Sisters and wish them a happy feast day.

Among his countless multitude of all the saints in heaven are some who have been canonized as saints, publicly recognized by the Church, raised to the altars because of some outstanding gifts or charisms with which they have enlightened our Church.

Cardinal Newman colorfully speaks of

“Those who have the traces of heaven upon them..., rare servants of God who rise up from time to time in the Catholic Church like angels in disguise, and shed around them a light as they walk on their way heavenward.”

I have no idea how many canonized saints there are, but for each of them there is a

uniqueness, their paths to holiness distinctively patterned to their personality and to the needs of their time. Some died as teens, others lived to be a hundred; some were geniuses, others simple and unlearned; some were public sinners turned saint, others innocent their life long; some were pleasant and agreeable, others almost impossible to live with—which might suggest that most of us either live with or are helping to create saints. There is a saint, many a saint, to whom each of us – sinners and impossible as we can be – can look for encouragement and prayer. And the Lord wants it that way, for it is his radiant goodness that is reflected in and through each of them.

Today we recognize one such saint, canonized by Pope Benedict XVI three weeks ago today, St. Mary of the Cross, better known as St. Jeanne Jugan, Foundress in 1842 of the Little Sisters of the Poor. In 1864, the first Little Sisters of the Poor were welcomed to Baltimore by the 7th bishop of Baltimore, Martin John Spalding. Since then and to this very day the spiritual daughters of St. Jeanne Jugan have been beloved laborers in this vineyard, carrying out the desire of their patroness, to be poor among the poor, particularly among the elderly poor. To visit St. Martin's Home for the Aged in Catonsville or any one of their 29 other homes across the United States is to experience in a deeply moving way, in the words of Pope Benedict, Jeanne Jugan's "joyful, disinterested service,...carried out with gentleness and humility of heart."

Daily, our Little Sisters knock on doors of homes and stores begging for food and other gifts on behalf of their residents. Their lives, in imitation of St. Jeanne, "are founded on unlimited trust in God's Providence." This being World Series time, I recall as a young boy often going to Yankee Stadium with my father and brothers and invariably passing a little Sister outside the main gates of the stadium, smiling and with begging basket in hand. While I suspect that most fans there were, like us, blue collar, city Catholics, no one – Protestant, Catholic or Jew – would dare pass them by without reaching for a donation, for fear that a Yankee disaster or worse would befall them. And I know you will ever do the same the next time you see a Little Sister, smiling, with begging basket in hand. And that might be sooner than you think!

Blessed are the poor in spirit is how Jesus praised those who would follow him for

centuries and millennia to follow, placing their whole trust in God as a loving and ever responsive Father. Willing to be detached from anything and everything, ultimately, if that were to be the price for doing the will of God. In the All Saints Sisters of the Poor and today most especially in St. Jeanne Jugan and her Little Sisters of the Poor, we give thanks to God through this Eucharist for their witness to Christian holiness, a reflection of all the saints in heaven and an ongoing challenge to us wayfarers, “walking on our way heavenward.”

For it is at this Eucharistic table that those transparent heavenly curtains open wide. In Pope John Paul’s image: “The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth. It is a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey.

Let us, friends, approach this altar to enjoy that foretaste of heaven and seal our unity with the Risen Christ and with all the saints who surround him in glory.