

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Have each group member bring photos or remembrances of loved ones. Take turns placing the photo or object on a low table at the center of your group and telling very briefly who each is. Honor them with flowers.

LEADER: We come to remember and pray for our loved ones who have died believing in Jesus' promise of life with God forever.

ALL: Blessed are they.

LEADER: May they find rest from their labors.

ALL: For their good works accompany them.

Gustav Mahler takes listeners to the edge of holy mystery in his "Resurrection Symphony." For an hour the audience hears musicians express the longing for immortality in the voices of soaring violins, commanding trumpets, horns, oboes, flutes until in the end when the instruments can say no more, a great choir of human voices sings with all its strength a hymn of faith in Jesus' promise of resurrection.

The first time I heard the symphony I found myself with tears running down my face at the end. I wasn't the only one. Music creates intimacy in crowds.

But the tears surprised me. The whole experience touched into the deepest of human yearnings—for life beyond death, for lasting communion with those we love in God.

Naturally I went to hear the symphony when a group undertook the giant production at Central Lutheran, a downtown church with a center nave and two wings, all facing the central sanctuary. The orchestra sat in the sanctuary. The chorus filled the balconies above the wings, women on one side, men on the other.

The music surrounded us as the human voices lifted up our common longing and deepest hope. Again tears. At the end the whole audience needed time to breathe and feel the awe before the clapping began.

Like the music All Saints and All Souls Days remind us we live in faith at the edge of mystery. All Souls Day is a feast rooted in the deepest of our human experiences—the inseparableness

of the dead from the living. We are born into the communion of saints as we are born into a family. The Church exists today because down the centuries people have believed Jesus' message, have found God present in creation, have felt in themselves the stirring of the Spirit for lasting union.

In honoring family members we remember those who loved us step by step into full personhood. In praying for all souls, we remember those whose faith we inherit in our families and Christian communities.



In Mexican culture, All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day are important feast days. Mexican families make *Dias de los Muertos ofrendas*, Days of the Dead altars, on which they put photos and mementos of deceased loved ones. They honor the dead with real or tissue-paper flowers, favorite dishes, and candles. Families also put sweet breads and water on the altars, the basic nourishment for human life.

On All Souls Day itself people take the food from the ofrendas to the graves of family members. They clean the graves and decorate them with marigolds (*zempasuchil*) and other flowers. Marigolds are the symbolic flowers of death of the Aztec people of ancient Mexico. Families picnic in the cemetery, light incense and candles, and keep vigils into the night.

These customs introduce children to grandparents, aunts, and uncles they may never have known in life. On this day the living visit the dead, and the dead come to life in the memories of their families and friends.

● In what special ways do you keep All Souls Day?

GOSPEL

Jesus promises never to lose us.

NARRATOR: Jesus spoke to his disciples.

JESUS 1: All that the Father gives me will come to me; no one who comes to me will I ever reject.

JESUS 2: For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of the One who sent me. This is the will of the One who sent me—that I should lose nothing of all that God has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

JESUS 3: This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.

John 6.37-40



Jesus leads us to communion with God.

The gospel passage for All Souls Day takes four verses out of their context in John 6 in order to spotlight and affirm Jesus' promise that he will lose nothing of all that God has given him. The promise that Jesus embodies for believers is the message for All Souls Day.

John 6 begins by narrating one of the seven signs in John's gospel that reveal who Jesus is. The sign is Jesus multiplying five barley loaves and two fishes to feed 5,000 people. Ironically, the very people who witness this sign ask the next day for another sign. They have seen Jesus, but they don't believe in him.

Just before these four verses Jesus announces, "I am the bread of life." Just after, Jesus insists that he, not manna, is the bread that has come down from heaven. The

Christian community that gives us John's gospel sees Jesus' work and mission in continuity with God's work in the history of the people of Israel. It is not separate. Faith in Jesus and faith in God who sent him are the same.

Jesus' Abba promises eternal life to all who see and believe in the Son. God intends that all who believe in Jesus will be raised up as he was.

Like each of the gospel writers, John is writing after Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The last gospel to be written, the community that gives us John's gospel reflected the longest on who Jesus was. In the fourth gospel Jesus' story does not begin in Bethlehem or with his baptism but in the beginning with God. Jesus is the pre-existing Word.

John presents Jesus' death not as an ending but as the hour of Jesus' glorification, of his return to God from whom he has come. Jesus is the Word, who is with God and from God, who became flesh, lived among us, and revealed God. Jesus comes forth from, and in his death and resurrection returns to, God, his Abba.

● What words from the gospels do you often remember because they express your faith?

● How do you explain your faith in the resurrection?

Death calls for faith. It is the ultimate threshold of human life beyond which we cannot see. Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the heart of Christian faith.

The God who raised Jesus from the dead is the God of creation. The God of our first day is the God of the last day. The God in whom all that is originates and evolves is the God at the heart of all that the cosmos will become. All creation testifies to God's lifegiving power. All creation calls us to faith in the giver of life, the giver of our days. All that lives is a sign of who God is.

Honoring our loved ones who have died calls us to ask who the God is in whom we believe. Is this God a judge, a warrior, a father, a life-giver, a communion of love? John's gospel emphasizes God is Jesus' Abba, the one who raised him from the dead, who never lets us go.

● What are your feelings about death?

● What does creation testify about your God?



All Souls is a feast day that in the past separated Catholic Christians from Protestant Christians. Catholics believe in praying for the dead. Before Vatican II, Catholics made visits to church on this day, prayed three *Our Fathers*, three *Hail Marys*, and three *Glory Be's* on each visit to get souls out of purgatory and into full communion with God.

Protestant reformers rejected the idea that any prayers or other good works could affect our salvation. Faith alone—without works—sufficed. Salvation is God's gift, wholly undeserved. Martin Luther's complaints against the Church's system of indulgences were part of what caused the Reformation.

Theologically, purgatory is a process for people who are not perfect when they die. In purgatory they continue their transformation into readiness to see God.

In his book *Catholicism*, Richard McBrien emphasizes purgatory is not a place but “a process by which we are purged of our residual selfishness so that we can really become one with the God who is totally oriented to others, the self-giving God” (1145).

Bible scholarship has rediscovered that we cannot separate Jesus' death from his resurrection. The liturgical reforms of Vatican II have changed our Catholic funerals from mournful prayer to save people from God's wrath to joyful celebrations of our faith in Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Prayer for all souls is a regular part of our worship. We affirm every time we profess the creed our faith in the communion of saints, the living and dead of all times and places. We join their praise before God every time we sing “Holy, Holy, Holy” at Eucharist. We pray for and with them in every Eucharistic Prayer.

● What communion do you feel with loved ones who have died? How do you express it?

FIRST READING

The just live with God.

The book of Wisdom comes from the centuries just before Jesus' birth when the Greeks ruled Israel and sought to unify the world with their culture. When faithful Jews lost their lives for keeping the Law of Moses, their deaths raised the question in Sunday's first reading: What happens to the just in death?

The day of wrath Malachi describes is the reverse side of God's promises to Israel. To a people complacent and apathetic about the demands of justice, the prophets speak words of accusation and doom. They bring suit against Israel for infidelity to God and God's promises. They promise God's wrath will burn away their injustice rather than protect the people against their enemies. Their enemies will be the hand of God against them.

The answer for Jews lies in God the creator. The one from whom all that is comes must also be the one to whom all return. The creator must hold them in death as in life. They cannot be apart from God to whom they belong. To their persecutors, death is a punishment, but to these faithful Jews, death holds hope full of immortality.

The just will shine.

The souls of the just are in the hands of God, and no torment will touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died, their departure thought to be a disaster, their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy; like gold in the furnace God tried them; like a sacrificial burnt offering God accepted them. In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble. They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Holy One

will reign over them forever. Those who trust in God will understand truth; the faithful will abide with God in love, for grace and mercy are upon God's holy ones, and God watches over these who are God's own.

Wisdom 3.1-9

● What motivates you to pray for the dead?

● What questions about life after death do you live with?

PRAY

LEADER: Let us endure in our faith that the creator of life from whom we have birth will embrace us in eternal communion.

ALL: Blessed are the dead who die in faith.

LEADER: Let us name the souls for whom we pray today.

Group members call out the names of loved ones.

LEADER: May they rest from their labors. **ALL:** In the dwelling places Jesus promises us all. Amen.



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DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Help organize a parish bereavement group for people who have lost loved ones.
- Organize a display board in your parish that celebrates ordinary saints among us, especially married men and women whose presence in the communion of saints our official roster of saints does not well represent.

EXCELLENT FOR BEREAVEMENT GROUPS!

Linda Andreozzi's story of loss, grief, and recovery inspires the journaling questions and exercises in this book. Linda's experience of loss makes this book helpful in coping with other kinds of loss— job, home, faith. The luminous art makes this journal a healing sacramental.

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