

Homily for the Feast of All Souls

November 2, 2025

St. Bavo Parish

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First Reading: Wisdom 3:1-9 (The souls of the just are in the hand of God.)

Responsory: Psalm 23 (The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.)

Second Reading: Romans 8:14-23 (We groan within ourselves as we await adoption, the redemption of our bodies.)

Gospel: John 6:37-40 (I will not reject anyone who comes to me.)

Normally, we don't celebrate funeral masses on Sundays. But today is an exception. On the Feast of All Souls, we celebrate one collective funeral mass for all of our deceased loved ones. And, as at any funeral mass, we not only remember those who have gone before us, but we also ponder the Paschal Mystery and the promise of eternal life that the Lord gave to them and to all of us who believe in him.

Our first reading today, from the Book of Wisdom, is by far the most popular Old Testament reading to proclaim at funerals. I find it especially consoling, because it deals honestly with the reality of death and dying. The author doesn't sugarcoat the experience of watching a loved one die. He admits that the dying process looks absolutely awful, like the worst affliction that one could possibly suffer. And he further admits that death itself looks to everyone like a definitive end to the person's life. It is in that context, the real-life situation of the mourners at a funeral, that the author proclaims the truth that God has revealed to the wise: "The souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them... They are in peace... The faithful shall abide with [God] in love: because grace and mercy are with his holy ones, and his care is with his elect."

For most people, in most situations, this "Word of the Lord" provides great solace and hope for their loved ones' eternal peace. However, because the Book of Wisdom was composed *before* the coming of Christ into the world, it could not proclaim the *fullness* of the Paschal Mystery. The author speaks only of what happens to "the just" after they die. "The faithful" shall abide with God in love, and grace and mercy will be with "his holy ones." What if we're not sure whether our loved ones qualify as "just," "faithful" and "holy"? The author of Wisdom doesn't concern himself with that question, because he is writing from a *pre-Christian* Jewish perspective. For him, those who count as "just," "faithful" and "holy" are those who follow the Mosaic Law. Since their righteous deeds under the Law determine their fate, it's clear and obvious to everyone whether they belong to God or not.

We Christians know that Christ abolished the old covenant and established a new covenant in his own blood. He came into the world to save *sinners*, not to save only the just and the righteous, who were already close to God and faithful to his commandments. In fact, he revealed that God loves the just and the unjust alike, and that there is great joy in heaven over every repentant sinner who turns back to the Lord to be healed and saved. In today's reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus makes his intentions abundantly clear. He says, "I will not reject *anyone* who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will,

but the will of the one who sent me.” And the will of the Father who sent him is, “that *everyone* who sees the Son of Man and believes in him may have eternal life.” Thanks be to God! We’re safe, and so are our loved ones who believed in Christ.

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, reflects on this mystery from a different perspective — not that of mourners saying good-bye to a loved one, but of children of God in the midst of their sojourn in this world. Not only do we walk by faith, with confidence in the resurrection of the dead, but we bear witness to the “spirit of adoption” that moves within us while we remain here, in the flesh. That Spirit prevents us from falling back into fear or slavery to sin, and instead prompts us to cry out, “*Abba*, Father!” It gives us courage to suffer with Christ, so that we may also be glorified with him. In fact, Paul says that he considers the sufferings of this present time to be as *nothing* compared with the glory to be revealed in us. Though we have only the vaguest notion of what heaven will be like, I think we all share Paul’s confidence that no hardships that we face in this life will compare to the glory that awaits us. However, most of us probably are not quite as eager as Paul to find out what comes next. The way he sees it, the whole created world is straining forward to that goal, when everything will be “set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.” According to Paul, we too “groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

Whether we feel that same urgency to let go of this life and enter the next as soon as possible, or whether we’re content to continue our journey of faith in this life for quite a while longer, Paul is right to focus our attention on Christ and his promises. He died and rose *for our sake*. Our hope for eternal life in the Kingdom of God rests *solely* on him and his cross. Every funeral liturgy begins by sprinkling the earthly remains of the deceased with holy water and recalling, “In the waters of baptism, he/she died with Christ and rose with him to new life. May he/she now share with him eternal glory.”

This mystery is always before our eyes, especially as death approaches. Whenever I anoint someone who is not just seriously ill, but on the verge of death, I usually conclude the rite with this poignant commendation of the dying:

I commend you, my dear brother/sister, to almighty God,
and entrust you to your Creator.
May you return to him who formed you from the dust of the earth.
May holy Mary, the angels, and all the saints come to meet you
as you go forth from this life.
May Christ who was crucified for you bring you freedom and peace.
May Christ who died for you admit you into his garden of paradise.
May Christ, the true Shepherd, acknowledge you as one of his flock.
May he forgive all your sins, and set you among those he has chosen.
May you see your Redeemer face to face,
and enjoy the vision of God forever.

May all our hopes, which are so beautifully expressed in that prayer, be fulfilled for our deceased loved ones. And, when our time comes, may they be fulfilled for us, as well. May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.