

Christian Death Gives Meaning to Suffering All Souls (2011)

Yesterday, All Saints' Day, we celebrated God's masterpieces, the saints, those Christians who achieved **spiritual maturity** in this life, and so entered heaven **immediately** after their death.

Today's task is less joyful, perhaps, but not less **beautiful** or **meaningful**.

- Today the world's one billion Catholics are praying for the eternal rest of our brothers and sisters who died **in friendship with Christ**, but who hadn't yet reached spiritual maturity.
- God has taken them into his spiritual hospital, **purgatory**, where he is healing and purifying them from the **wounds** caused by their sins here on earth.
- Praying for them helps to **speed up their recovery** and hasten their **full entry** into the eternal joys of heaven.

But it is not just for **their** benefit that the Church invites us to pray for the deceased, it is also for **ours**.

- Remembering the Christian meaning of **death** helps us answer life's **most difficult question**: why does God allow so much suffering?
- Christ has revealed what the **future** holds: death, judgment, and either heaven or hell.
- As a result, we can answer that question in only two words: **just wait**.
- Life on earth is **not** the whole story; in fact, it's only the **introduction**.

Through sin, the abuse of our God-given freedom, **evil and suffering** entered this world.

But God's wisdom and omnipotence are working out a final conclusion in which **justice** and **mercy** will triumph, and God himself will **wipe away** every tear from our eyes.

- This is the message of today's First Reading, which promises that the "souls of the just are **in the hand of God**,"
- and that if they suffered during their **brief life** on earth, they will shine all the **more brightly** amid the **everlasting** joys of heaven:
- "As gold in the furnace, he proved them, and as sacrificial offerings he took them to himself. In the time of their visitation **they shall shine...**"

An Honor Guard's Regimen

Knowing that Christ, our good shepherd, will **redeem all our suffering** gives us a **reason** to accept and endure it.

In **Arlington National Cemetery** in Washington, D.C., there is a famous Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

- Twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, an **honor guard** marches back and forth in front of this Tomb, paying respect to soldiers who gave their life for their country.
- There has been a guard on duty **every minute of every day** since 1937.
- 80% of the soldiers who attempt to join the guard **fail to qualify**.
- The soldiers who **do** make it sign on for a **rigorous responsibility** that gives new meaning to the words "full time."
- The guards serve 24 hour shifts, and on the off day, it takes the average guard **eight hours to prepare** their uniforms for their next day of duty.
- To become a guard requires mastering a **vast amount of information**, including a thorough knowledge of who is buried in over **150 different grave sties** in Arlington National Cemetery, the memorization of 12 poems, and an exhaustive briefing on the Cemetery's history.
- After 9 months of duty, guards are given a **wreath pin** (Guard Identification Badge) in recognition of their service. Only 500 of these badges have been given since the inception of the award.
- The award can be **revoked** by the Regimental Commander if a former guard commits an offense that discredits the Tomb.

Those soldiers take on the necessary **sacrifices** only because they know it serves a **worthwhile purpose**.

Serving Christ and defending his eternal Kingdom is an even **higher** purpose, for which true Christians will gladly carry **whatever cross** God in his loving wisdom sends them.

Understanding the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick

One of the ways the Church continues to **remind** us of these beautiful, important truths is through the **sacrament of the anointing of the sick**.

Illness is one of life's great challenges, and **Christ wants to accompany us** in the midst of it, giving it **meaning**.

He **showed this** by his many miracles and healings during his earthly life.

He **continues** to show it today through the testimony of his followers who minister to the sick, and in a special way through this sacrament.

And this is why the Church instructs that it

- "is **not** a sacrament for those **only** who are at the point of death. Hence, **as soon as** anyone of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old

age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly **already** arrived," (Catechism #1514).

- The sacrament can be received **more than once**, if someone falls into another grave illness after recovering from an earlier one, or if someone's **condition worsens** after having already received the sacrament.
- It can also be received before undergoing a **serious operation**.

It is a **simple** sacrament,

- in which the priest **anoints the sick person** on the forehead and hands with blessed oil,
- and says this simple, beautiful prayer:
- "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy **help** you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up."
- This **elegant and powerful** sacrament is not one that we should **fear**.
- We should **not wait too long** before **inviting** a sick friend or relative to receive this sacrament.

Illness, suffering, and death are not **options**: they come to **all** of us.

Jesus Christ, the **conqueror** of all evil and the **giver** of eternal life, wants to **grant them meaning**.

Today, let's tell him that we want to give him that chance.