

32nd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (November 12, 2023)

In this month of November, in these last few weeks of the liturgical year, the Church invites us to be especially mindful of our ultimate goal—eternal life on high in heaven. On All Saints Day (November 1) we remembered with joy all those souls now in the immediate presence of God. We call them ‘saints’—whether or not formally canonized by the Church as such. The next day—All Souls Day—we remembered and prayed for the souls of all who have died and still in need of the grace of final cleansing and preparation for heaven.

And today’s readings remind us of the sobering truth that we will all face that moment when our earthly life will come to an end—when we will face death. St. Paul had to reassure the Thessalonians that Jesus himself, who died and rose from the dead, will bring with him those believing in him who have died. And in his parable of the wise and foolish virgins, Jesus reminds us of our need to ‘stay awake’, to be prepared for his coming since we ‘know neither the day nor the hour’ when that will happen.

What does it mean to be prepared, to ‘stay awake’ in this sense? To begin with, it means simply acknowledging the fact that every single one of us will face death—not only those we love, but we ourselves as well. I certainly don’t mean that we should live under constant dread and fear. This life on earth is an amazing gift from God filled with blessings beyond counting for which we should thank God daily. But if we try to ignore death completely or ‘wish it away’ because it’s too uncomfortable for us to think about, we’re only kidding ourselves.

So how can we prepare, how do we need to prepare for death? Maybe the first thing is to just say it: “I will die one day.” Again, not to obsess about it, but simply to be honest with ourselves. Can we look ourselves in the mirror and say those words...or are we skittish or really uncomfortable in doing so? If it’s the latter, then we need to ask ourselves “why—why don’t I want to say those words?” We might want to ask God to help us know why we are reacting that way. That might just be the way we realize in what ways we still need the grace of God to turn away from those sins or faults we are still clinging to for whatever reason.

Another way we can prepare for death is to give some thought to one’s own funeral and maybe even doing some advanced planning for it. That might sound rather morbid, but it’s very practical—not to mention extremely helpful for the loved ones we leave behind. The archdiocese strongly recommends that we priests have our own funeral plans on file. Several years ago I decided on the readings and music I’d like for my funeral, and I have made arrangements for my casket. Don’t get me wrong—I hope and pray that I’ll be around for many years yet; I’m not planning on checking out any time soon! But as we all know, our own plans don’t always turn out ‘according to plan’. Many times I’ve worked with folks who make such arrangements ahead of time either for themselves or a loved one, and it’s a huge help for the family when the time comes. If any of you might be interested in such pre-planning or have any questions about it, let me know—I’ll be more than happy to visit with you about it.

The most important way that we prepare for death, however, is to decide how we choose to live our lives—what are we striving for, what is the ultimate purpose of this life on earth. If we remember that this life, great gift from God that it certainly is, is not our final goal, then we will be more likely to remember and live out how Jesus calls us to live and to love. God has made us for eternal life; that is his great desire for us, and he wants us to live in this world in the way he has taught us through his Son so that death will be the entrance into that joy-filled eternity. As St. Augustine said it so well about 1600 years ago: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in

you.” Our hearts will rest in God if we choose to live for him in all the circumstances of life...and if we entrust ourselves to his mercy when we stray from his path.

As one priest-author put it: “God has entrusted us in this life with the power to make of ourselves what we aspire to be forever.” That is really well said. This life is the opportunity we have to choose for our heavenly Father, to follow his Son Jesus, and to seek and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. St. Angela Merici, a 16th-century religious teacher, wisely challenges us to “do now what you will wish to have done when your moment comes to die.” The more we do so, the less we will fear death and the more we will be prepared for death. And we will see death not as the ultimate tragedy or enemy, but rather as the entry into the unimaginable joy that God has prepared for those who love him in all the circumstances of life. But now is the time to do so, for as Jesus says: “you know neither the day nor the hour.”