

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Nov 2nd 2014

Today is All Souls Day and a Sunday. It seems particularly powerful to be gathering together as community for Sunday liturgy and to commemorate all the faithful departed. I always appreciate praying in every liturgy for our loved ones who have departed this life and All Souls Day today brings me closer to those I love and selfishly miss.

Many of us Catholics were taught that the souls of our loved ones are in purgatory. Purgatory is defined as a state after death in which the souls of people who die are made pure through suffering before going to heaven. Purgatory can also mean a place or state of suffering.

Today is also the birthday of my great aunt Nina who passed away in 1976 . Nina suffered greatly with rheumatoid arthritis. Her hands were gnarled by the disease and her legs were fused straight, forcing her to move in a shuffling manner. She remained single and fiercely independent. As children we experienced Nina as a joyful, playful person who invited us for sleepovers at her home, played board games with us, sewed and baked for us and taught us to enjoy the pleasure of an evening of watching Lawrence Welk on TV.

Now as an adult I realize what a purgatory on earth Nina was living in. She must have been experiencing great pain with her arthritis, yet she was a delight to be with. When she became ill as a young woman she was worried that she would be a burden to her family so she searched for a way to earn a living and became a rural telephone operator. The stress of maintaining her livelihood must have been hard to manage. I know her deep and abiding faith were a constant in Nina's life. Today, I am comforted by the Book of Wisdom: The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God and no torment shall touch them.

Reflecting upon the life of my dear Aunt Nina helps me pray about the purgatories we can experience here on earth. Sometimes purgatory on earth is imposed upon us such as with Nina's illness and sometimes our own disordered attachments lead us to a sense of purgatory. As I pray I ask myself these questions: What unhealthy habits do I cling to that keep me from a deeper knowledge of God? When do I let worry, pride, fear or hubris create a sense of purgatory? As I pray for the souls of my loved ones how can I embody their wonderful traits to help me better serve the kingdom of God?

In today's Gospel from John Jesus shares what we must be reminded of so very often: For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life and I shall raise him on the last day.

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