

NOVEMBER 2 2024 FATHER MICHAEL COUTTS

Today we celebrate the feast, as we said, of the commemoration of the faithful departed. When I was a little kid, it was called All Souls Day, and I imagined All Souls as little faces flying and fluttering in the sky with wings around their ears. As I grew older, I realized it's not just souls; it's the resurrection of the body, and it makes sense based on the mystery of the incarnation. The Word became flesh and dwelled amongst us, and Jesus suffered, died, and rose again—His Body and Soul. We make this distinction. But the whole person rose from the dead, and that is what we celebrate today.

I'd like to share with you three thoughts: We remember, we celebrate, we believe. And I like to start with Johnny Cash, whose final album was "American VI: There Ain't No Grave." Johnny Cash believed not only in the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday but also had a firm belief that he would rise, his body would rise again, and he would rise from the dead. Very often, it's not from theology books but from the **Sensus Fidelium**, from the faith of the people, that we understand what this resurrection from the dead means—the way we believe together.

So, we remember. We remember all our relatives and friends. I remember my mom, my dad, my brother Victor, my nephews and nieces who have passed away, my cousins. All of these people have shaped my life and helped me become who I am today as a person, as a priest, and as a Jesuit. And they are in Heaven now. As the Book of Wisdom says, the souls of the just are in the hands of God. But what of us, we who are sinners? We don't totally merit going to Heaven right away. We have to do some things for the things we have done, and so we speak about purgatory.

But it's not something we thought of in the past, where there was fire, torture, and punishment. Rather, it's like an antechamber to Heaven. It's based on the beautiful reading from Job that says, "I know that my redeemer lives, and on the last day, I shall see my God, my Saviour." Now, don't quote me, but this is my way of looking at purgatory. Namely, we are waiting for a tax rebate—a huge, big tax rebate—when God will tell us, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Come and sit at the table of the Lord."

So, how long should we pray for the souls in purgatory? I would say as long as you think they cared for you, loved you, and nurtured you. In the case of my mother, father, brother, friends, and parishioners—whether in Guyana, Chepstow, or St. Andrew's in Thunder Bay—they shaped me, and so I will pray for them until the day I die. Therefore, there's a need for us to celebrate their lives.

I remember when I was working in an auto bay in Jamaica, I was coming down for a funeral, and I was thinking about what I had to say. One of the Jamaicans came to me and said, "Father, just go up the hill." I asked, "What do you mean?" He replied, "When you get that rhythm into your shoulders, into your hips, then you can come down." But I said, "We're doing a funeral." He responded, "Yes, we're going to cry for this man we loved so much, but we're also going to celebrate. Celebrate his love of life, his music, his care for people. That's what we need to celebrate. We're not celebrating a death; we're celebrating a life."

I remember another time when I was in the hospital. A nine-year-old girl was dying from leukemia, and she was resting. At the door, the doctors and family were talking about funeral arrangements, thinking she was asleep, but she wasn't. When they came back in, she said, "You know how excited I am? I'm going to meet Jesus. I'm going to see Jesus, my grandparents, and my friends who have died. Is there any message you'd like me to give them? Would you like me to say thank you or I'm sorry?" I had to turn away because there were tears coming down. What faith. What belief.

And that is what we believe today. I believe in the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. How can that happen? Jesus says in the gospel today, "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it falls into the ground and dies, it will bear much fruit."

You and I, from the time we were born, have been bearing fruits of love, joy, kindness, and generosity. These are the things we hand down to others, but we cannot hand them down unless they were first handed down to us from our parents, siblings, and all those around us. They shaped us and made us who we are today.

If we are to glorify, celebrate, and believe, then these are the things we believe in. These are the things we celebrate today. Truly, we have to thank God for all the gifts God has given to us.

As I remember the souls of the faithful departed—or better yet, as we commemorate the souls of our faithful departed—we thank God for them and look through them. Their parting will never be filled. It's a loss

that is total and complete. But as we go through the years, time helps us bear with it. Time helps us celebrate their lives and enrich our own.

As Rabindranath Tagore said, “Death is not an extinguishing of the light, but putting out the lamp because we know that the day has come.” We know Christ has come into our lives, and that is what we celebrate. We believe, we celebrate, we remember—in whatever order you take it, this is what we do on this Feast of the Commemoration of the Souls of the Faithful Departed.

God bless you all.