

SURROUNDED BY WITNESSES

REV. DONNCHA Ó HAODHA

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask you for pardon of my sins and grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Mother Immaculate, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

The First Letter of St. John begins with a very interesting series of words. He seizes our attention from the start. He says, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we- which we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerning the Word of Life, the life was made manifest and we saw it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us. That which we have seen and heard, we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete."

It's like a prologue, perhaps, to this First Letter of St. John. It's his motivation in writing the letter. And we're struck here by *that which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we have looked upon and touched with our hands*. What is this *that*? In fact, it's not really a *that*, it's a *who*, it's the Lord, the Incarnate Word, the Word of Life. St. John is the great apostle of the Word made flesh, of the Word Incarnate, and his whole life and his whole ministry is full of this desire to communicate the joy of friendship with Christ, the Word of Life, who was, as he said, made manifest, and we saw it and testify to it and proclaim to you.

I suppose it's the model of all evangelization, isn't it? That from our own friendship with Our Lord comes the desire to proclaim him to others, from touching Christ, from seeing him, from listening to him in our prayer comes the strength and the motivation to share him with others. Interestingly, St. John also says, "We proclaim this to you, being Christ, so that you may have fellowship with us and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete." So, this is about fellowship, this is about communion, this is about belonging together, that those who share the faith in Jesus Christ belong to a communion with the Father and with the Son, and I guess you could say the very notion of fellowship implies the love of the Holy Spirit as well. What St. John is talking about here, in a sense, is the Communion of Saints. It is a beautiful description of the Church, essentially, these opening lines of the First Epistle of John - it's a description of the Communion of Saints, which is the Church, not just a comforting idea, but a true and deeply consoling reality, that in and through Christ, we are one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, we are one in Christ, one body in Christ.

Indeed, Lord, that is what you- you did by virtue of your Incarnation and your Redemption - you came to break down any barriers that separate us from God and from one another and to make us one in and through you, in and through your Cross and Resurrection. That's what the Church is and that's what's spurring St. John here to write this Epistle. He says, "We are writing that our joy may be complete." There are some translations which say, "And we are writing this, that *your* joy may be complete." In a sense, it doesn't matter whether it's *the* joy, the joy of John and the early Christian community, or *our* joy, the joy of all of us who read and believe also through this testimony. In one way or the other, it conveys deeply the reality that all who are united with Christ are one, have a very deep communion with Him.

In the month of November, the Church focuses particularly on this Communion of Saints, the communion of, you might say, the three aspects of the Church: the heavenly Church, which is the Church at home; the earthly Church, we could say, the pilgrim Church, the church militant, the Church which is fighting its way towards Heaven, struggling through the ups and downs of life, that's us; and then the sleeping Church, those who sleep in the peace of Christ, the Church in purgatory, those who are undergoing the final purification of the elect. Those three aspects of the church - Heavenly, Earthly, and purgatorial - are intimately united in and through Christ by the Holy Spirit. That's a wonderful thing to reflect on - that, in our faith, in our life, we're never alone. Right now, perhaps you're doing your prayer, and I'm trying to do my prayer on my own in a certain sense, but not at all. On the one hand, prayer is deeply, deeply personal, and at the same time, prayer is always social, it's part of the family of the Church. I can only say, *I* believe within the great *we* believe of the Church. If I'm not mistaken, that's a theme that's quite common in the writings of Joseph Ratzinger - the *we* believe of the Church makes possible the *I* believe of each one.

The Second Vatican Council teaches in *Lumen Gentium*, 49: "All who belong to Christ, having his Spirit, form one Church and cleave together in him." Well, the two great liturgical feasts with which we start November - well, the first one is a commemoration, the Commemoration of All Souls on the first of November. Excuse me, no, the first of November is the is the great solemnity, the Great Feast of All Saints, and the second of November is the Commemoration of All Souls. Well, the first and the second of November place us right in at the heart of this mystery of the Communion of Saints, that we have this deep bond in and through Christ by the Holy Spirit with all our brothers and sisters who have ever believed in Christ, or do believe in Christ, or will ever believe in Christ. This goes with belonging to the Church. It's interesting - in the- in the Rite of Baptism, there's always a Litany of the Saints, that's part of the Rite of Baptism and there we invoke, of course, the holy angels, the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, St. John the Baptist, and then, very often, the names of other saints may be added, including the patron saints of the child being baptized or the parents or the godparents or the patron saint of the church in which the baptism taking place, or the saint of the day. In any event, it's significant that- that crucial moment in which we enter the Church, in which we become living men- members of Christ's body. We invoke our brothers and sisters in Heaven as part of the Communion of the Saints. And it reminds us that, on being baptized, we enter into this intimate communion - we are not alone. In life or in death we are never alone. In Christ, we are united with everybody. And right now in our prayer, wherever we might be, you know, in some quiet spot, trying to pray or to meditate, we can reach and, as it were, touch and embrace with our prayer, our

brothers and sisters all over the world, those who are suffering for their faith right now - unfortunately, there are many - those who are strong in the faith, those who are weaker in the faith, those who are rich, those who are poor, those who are elderly, those who are recently baptized - all the faithful - we're united in Christ and there is that beautiful bond.

In his great book, *Introduction to Christianity*, Joseph Ratzinger wrote, "Man's conversation with God and man's conversation with one another demand and condition each other." Somehow our prayer is shaped also by our relationships with others. And indeed, when we pray for others, we're all together united in Christ somehow. Man's conversation with God and our conversation among ourselves demand and condition each other.

Towards the end of the Letter to the Hebrews, the sacred writer that gives a series of bits of advice and encouragement to the readers of that letter. It's taught that the readers of the Letter to the Hebrews were predominantly Jewish priests or Levites who had come into the Church. And perhaps they were suffering some persecution or some difficulties. And the sacred writer gives them various pieces of advice in that letter. And towards the end, he says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith - it's a beautiful description of the Christian life, of the journey, of the race, I guess, each one of us is undertaking with the help of God's grace, running towards Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Again, we're not alone in this journey, we're not alone in this race. We are, as the sacred writer says, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

The great Ronald Knox, the great English literato, convert, writer, a priest, preacher - somewhere he talks about this passage from the book, sorry, from the Letter to the Hebrews, and he imagines it as if there were like a covering separating Heaven from Earth, and the saints can see through the covering down to us but we can't see into them. And they're there, they're seeing you and me running the race of our lives, the race to- to be close to Our Lord, to sanctify our work, to love our people, our families, to grow in virtue, to overcome sin, and vice and weaknesses - all those things, the battle of the Christian life, the adventure of the love affair with Christ, which is every Christian life. And the saints are looking in on this not in a detached way but cheering us on. They are a great cloud of witnesses which surrounds us - they're witnesses. They- they bear witness to the fact that holiness is indeed possible and that we're called to that holiness, and that- they're- they're there to help us by praying for us, by interceding for us.

In 1937, during the Spanish Civil War, St. Josemaria found himself, along with some of his first children, his first sons in Opus Dei, taking refuge in- it was a somewhat precarious refuge, but it was the best they could find, in the delegation of the Republic of Honduras in Madrid. And they're- that little group of people with the founder of Opus Dei, they- they took shelter there, along with many other refugees. They were there from March to August of 1937. And it was an extremely tough time to say the least, because well,

physically they lacked every kind of comfort, they lacked food, they were under severe stress and anxiety which is only normal - not knowing what was going on outside, in constant danger of being arrested or even killed. It's hard for us, actually, to enter into that mindset, because it must have been really, really difficult. And within that context, St. Josemaria preached a meditation to his spiritual sons quite often, nearly every day, to encourage them and I presume also to encourage himself, you know, to grow in his own spiritual life in those extreme circumstances. And one of the meditations he gave was about the communion of the saints. And he explained there the fundamental theology, faith of the communion of saints, that any good act done by us in the state of grace can benefit other people, and likewise, their good acts benefit us. And he drew out the analogy to apply it to their particular circumstances that while they were holed up in there in the Honduran Legation, they weren't ineffective, they could help the people outside in Madrid or people caught up in the war or hiding in other places. They could help them through their prayer, through their faithfulness, through their vocation just as they too were being sustained by the fidelity, the prayer, the goodness, really, of other people.

And that's always the way of the Church. Right now, you and I, we are sustained by the prayer of so many good people. And maybe people we'll never meet this side of Heaven, but they're there praying for us, helping us, supporting us. And we too, you know, by trying to do this period of meditation together, by praying, we can help so many people, many, many souls in a beautiful way, in a powerful way, even though we may not- never- never get to know them in this life. So, Christian life- the Christian life is not lonely. It's not- it's not- it's not an isolated thing. During the pandemic, it has become customary to say, as a kind of a slogan or a word of encouragement, we are in this together, we are in this together. And it is true, you know, it's been obvious that its- health situation has affected the whole world - literally, something extraordinary. And- and even in our prayer, we're in this together, praying now for some parts of the world which are suffering more than other parts, praying for all who have died, for all who have served in different ways through this period. We are in this together. But not only in unfortunate things like a contagious virus, but we're in it also together in grace, when we share the life of grace.

So, we could think, even though in our prayer of what- what are my typical struggles, my battles, you know, what have I found difficult today so far, well maybe I can offer them now for all my brothers and sisters who might need them, perhaps people who have gone before- before me marked with the sign of faith, the holy souls in purgatory who could benefit from this act of love of offering of what I have found difficult today. Or perhaps I'm offering it for the Holy Father, for the Church, for the bishops, for the priests, for families, for married couples, for engaged couples, for the sick, for the dying, and- and we can reach all those people, all those souls, right now with the movement of the heart through the Communion of Saints. This is the fellowship in Jesus Christ and in the Father of which St. John speaks at the beginning of the first of his epistles, it's the Communion of Saints.

In November, of course, we pray with a heart and a half for the holy souls in purgatory - a beautiful thing to do. We could say we do it almost self-interestedly because we know that when, please God, they reach Heaven, they're going to help us to make our way there when our time comes too. And that's normal, isn't

it, in any family, that we help one another. I've been reading recently a book about emigration from Ireland to the United States in the 19th century which was a massive phenomenon, a massive phenomenon, due to the famine in Ireland and due to the welcome received in the States - we're talking millions of people uprooted and seeking and finding a new home. But very often what happened was some members of the family got there first and set up the house and got- got themselves established and then they sent home some money for transport for the other members of the family to get out there and join them and begin a new life there. That's an analogy, but it's not unlike what we're talking about here in- in praying for the holy souls that they too help us on our journey through life and please God into Heaven with them when the time comes.

There's a very interesting text written by St. Thomas More which has been republished in recent years. He wrote this in September of 1529, a few weeks before being appointed Lord Chancellor of England. And this text is called *The Supplication of Souls*. And what it is is a vigorous defense of the existence of purgatory, and he crafts it with grief, humor, and art. And at times it's quite- he's stinging, you know, he- he makes to the point with- with- with strength, sometimes with- with irony as well. Now, this particular book, which was written in haste, and there's an element of repetitions here and there, that you kind of get the impression that it flowed from his pen fairly fast, and it's- it's a very vibrant text, it is response to another book. A man called Simon Fish in February of 1529 had written a book called *A Supplication for Beggars*. And More's response is called *This Obligation of Souls*. And in the original text, the first one, written by Simon Fish, excuse me, Simon Fish, in *A Supplication for Beggars*, contended that Masses should not be offered for the dead, that it was a waste of money to give money for alms, for Masses to be offered for the dead, not to, you know, he encouraged- discouraged people from paying for the dead. And his thesis was that the priests were grabbing the money. It was quite an anti-clerical tract, of course, and probably within the greater context of the- the Protestant unrest of that time.

And in any event, More writes his response, and it's very cleverly done because More, if you'd like, the narrative is written from the point of view of the holy souls who speak directly to the reader, and it makes it a very engaging read. For example: "In countering the claim that there's no need to pray for the dead, the souls of purgatory appeal directly to the readers and they say, 'Think of our pains and take pity in your hearts. And help us with your prayers, pilgrimages, and alms-giving, and most especially of all, procure for us the suffrages and blessed oblation of the holy Mass of which no one living can tell the fruit so well as we who here taste it.'" I mean, More's defense of purgatory in *The Supplication of Souls* is very Scriptural, it's very rich. He also draws a lot on the Fathers of the Church. So, it's a very good summary of Catholic teaching on purgatory, albeit in a polemic text. But what's engaging is just how the souls, you know, speak to the living. And we can think of that, too, you know, that the holy souls in purgatory, they're not far away from us, they're not far away from us. In fact, they're very close.

I read earlier from the Second Vatican Council a beautiful text from *Lumen Gentium*, 49. I'll read a little bit more of that paragraph because it refers particularly to those who have died in Christ. The council teaches: "All who belong to Christ, having his Spirit, form one Church and cleave together in him. Therefore," the

Council teaches, "therefore, the union of the wayfarers, with the brethren who have gone to sleep in the peace of Christ, is not in the least interrupted. On the contrary, according to the perennial faith of the Church, it is strengthened through the exchanging of spiritual goods." That's an amazing statement, that the communion of the wayfarers, you and I, we're still on our way on Earth, the communion of the wayfarers with the brothers and sisters who have gone to the sleep- sorry, gone to sleep in the peace of Christ, that is to say, those who await entrant to Heaven, we pray for them every day and in the Mass, our communion with them is in no way interrupted. On the contrary, according to the perennial faith of the Church, it is strengthened through the exchanging of spiritual goods.

Sometimes we may- may even sort of have a certain feel or perception of the closeness to us of our loved ones who have died in the Lord - perhaps they're in Heaven, perhaps they're going through the final purification, but they're very close to us. And, not only is our union with them interrupted- not interrupted, and- but above all, it is strengthened, as we're told, by the exchanging of spiritual- spiritual goods. And that's really worth thinking about and praying about, how close we are to our brothers and sisters who are in Heaven, also to our brothers and sisters who are going through purgatory, and we try and assist them in going through it quickly without delay.

In that context, as well, there's another beautiful text which is worth reading or meditating on in our own time, which is St. John Henry Newman's longest poem which is called *The Dream of Gerontius*, which has also been put to music by Elgar. And- and in this poem - it's essentially the dialogue between an old man, Gerontius, who has just died - the poem begins at his deathbed - it's the dialogue between this- this old man and his guardian angel who faithfully accompanies him from his deathbed into the presence of the Lord for judgment. And it's a beautiful text. It's beautiful poetically but also theologically, because it draws on all the teaching of the Communion of Saints. And, without spoiling it for you, because I really think it would be worth reading it for yourself - if you will Google it, you'll get it straightaway - there's a lovely dialogue there between the guardian angel and the soul on its way to God. And- but also along the way, they meet other angels, different choirs of angels, and also the prayers of the people gathered around the old man's deathbed and also the priest who is leading them in prayer form in part, if you like, of the mosaic of the music of this poem. Again, it contains the whole doctrine, the whole beauty of the Communion of Saints.

So, Commemoration of All Souls, which comes after the great Feast of All Saints, brings to mind what the Church is - fellowship in the Holy Spirit through Christ with God the Father. And I suppose the high point of that communion, of that union, of that love, is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. You could say the Mass is the greatest ever family reunion. As St. Paul says, "Because there is one bread, we are one body." And when we take part in the Mass, we can be very conscious of our communion with Heaven and purgatory and Earth altogether. Even in the *I confess*, in the *Confiteor*, we say, "I ask Blessed Mary ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me, to the Lord our God." We ask Our Lady, the angels, the saints, and all our brothers and sisters, those present with us in that church at that time and throughout the world, all our brothers and sisters, to pray for us. Or in the *Holy, Holy*, in the *Sanctus*, with

the angels and the cherubim and the seraphim, together we sing God's praise. Or at Holy Communion, when we receive the Lord, we realize also that we're surrounded by all the angels and all the saints.

It is wonderful to reflect on the community of saints in the Mass and, I suppose, to look forward to meeting our brothers and sisters in the Mass. This is something we could ask St. Josemaria for as we come to the end of our prayer, this consciousness of the Communion of Saints, of this fellowship, especially in the Mass. He says in one of his homilies, "Through the Communion of the Saints, all Christians receive grace from every Mass that is celebrated regardless of whether there is an attendance of thousands of persons or whether there is only a little boy with his mind on other things who is there to serve the Mass. In either case, Heaven and Earth join with the angels of the Lord to sing, *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus - holy, holy, holy*. I adore and praise with the angels. It is not difficult because I know that as I celebrate the holy Mass, they surround me, adoring the blessed the Trinity. And I know that in some way the Blessed Virgin is there because of her intimate relationship with the most blessed Trinity. And because she is the mother of Christ, of his flesh and blood, the mother of Jesus Christ, perfect God, and perfect man."

I give you thanks, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask you for help to put them into effect. My Mother Immaculate, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE

WWW.STJOSEMARIA.ORG

Content may not be published or reprinted without permission.

We are pleased to offer a transcript of this podcast to serve the needs of all our subscribers. Please note, however, that this transcript is generated by AI and may not be perfectly accurate.