

[Readings: Wisdom 3:1-9; Psalm 23; Romans 5:5-11; John 6:37-40]

You and I have been blessed with the gift of the friendship of others. Whether in the distant past, the recent past or in our present moments of life, God has blessed us with men and women, young people and children who have made a difference in our lives. It's all about relationship.

And, as with all good and loving relationships, there are times of feeling distant, misunderstood and lonely. That is the ebb and flow of friendship.

There have been two people in my life in particular, that when we are not together, my heart misses them. To share time together. To laugh, to appreciate and to love the other in a moment of pure joy and completeness. When I am less than I should be in loving them, I feel guilt, remorse and pain. One of them died way back in August of 2005; the other just died last month. So I am grieving tonight as many of you here are grieving the loss of a loved one.

The same happens with our relationship with God. We are longing. There is something in our heart, and in our soul that is empty until it is filled with God.

This is what Purgatory is. It is both a process and a state of being when we are somehow not yet totally enveloped by the love of God, or when we are being purified by it. It is not a process of fire and brimstone, some sort of mini-hell that lasts for a certain amount of time. Nor is it a process or state where we are tortured by some sadistic God.

It is a process and a state of existence where the souls of all the people who have died before us prepare for their final union with God. The Church teaches that there is also a Hell, a place of eternal punishment and damnation. But Purgatory is a place of faith and hope. The souls of the faithful departed and we are on our way!

Our faith, our hope and our love say that we are somehow connected with our beloved deceased. That although their physical bodies no longer are with us, their spirit, their soul is somehow connected with us just as strongly as the souls of the Saints, which we celebrated yesterday, are connected with us.

The Church has three neat titles for all three groups of souls: The Church Militant, the Church Suffering and the Church Triumphant.

The Church Militant is you and me, and all Christian believers right here, right now. We are trying to fight the good fight in this world against a culture of death with the virtues and the graces God gives us and we develop as we grow in our spiritual lives. When we die, we sing, "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, the strife is over, the battle is done!"

The Church Suffering are the souls in Purgatory, whom we honor, we remember and for whom we pray on this Feast of the Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed, All Souls. The Church Triumphant are those souls now in Heaven, enjoying eternal union with God. It's all about relationships.

What unites all of us are faith, hope, love... and prayer. What is prayer? The classic definition of prayer is "talking to and listening to God, and reflecting on God's presence and actions in our lives."

Could we say that our relationships are like prayer? Talking and listening to each other, and reflecting on their presence and actions in our lives? Prayer is happening right here, right now on earth. It is happening in Purgatory, as the fruits of our prayer for the dead hasten their purification and preparation to be with God totally and eternally. Prayer is happening right now in Heaven, where the saints intercede for us with Mary and Jesus to the Father, in the Holy Spirit.

Prayer is the first component of our lives as Christian stewards. If we do not begin and end our day with prayer, if we do not connect with God before making important decisions or testing a relationship with another, we wander aimlessly and arrogantly. This ends only in frustration, confusion and loss.

When we put God first in our lives, we realize the fruitfulness of God working powerfully through the Holy Spirit in every moment, every action. Even if it appears to be a failure or leads to a broken heart. We are doing what God wants us to do at that moment.

Did you know that God answers every prayer with one of these four responses: Yes, I'll get right on it. Or, no, it won't be good for you if I did that. God may say, not yet, you have to be patient a little while longer. Or God may say, No, I Have something better in mind for you!

God always hears our prayers, when prayed with gratitude, and responds in the way that is best for us. Prayer is what will get us through this valley of tears as we remember, as we mourn, as we pray and as we hope. That is why we are here this evening. Prayer is what will get God's attention. Prayer is what will unite the Church – Militant, Suffering and Triumphant.

Praying together here, remembering here, tonight, is a very good start. AMEN!