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The Commemoration of the Faithful Departed  
All Souls Day

Today Holy Mother Church prays for her children who, at the moment of death, though destined for the everlasting glory of heaven, were not yet prepared to enter into that joy but who were also not deserving of hell. These are the Poor Souls in Purgatory, those who are being purged - purified - for the everlasting life of heaven.

This Commemoration of the Faithful Departed, this All Souls Day, is a stark reminder to us that not every soul enters the glory of heaven immediately at the moment of death.

This realization marks us with great sorrow and so we pray the Father of Mercies "hear our prayers and console us" and "strengthen our hope that all our departed brothers and sisters will share" in the resurrection of Christ Jesus, and we with them.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas yesterday Mother Church honored her heroic children who lived well the faith of Jesus Christ - the saints of every age and place - who are now with the Lord in glory, today we

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<sup>1</sup> Collect of the day.

pray for those who hope to share in that glory, "those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus says to us, "Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me" (John 6:37). It is our choice in this life whether or not to belong to Christ, but just as he will not reject anyone who comes to him, neither will he force anyone to come to him. The choice is ours, to be made again and again, at every moment of our lives. With every word we speak, thought we think, deed we do, we are free to accept or reject the grace given us. He extends his hand toward us, saying, "Come, follow me" (Luke 18:22), and he waits for us to either grasp his hand or walk away.

We know that "death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ."<sup>3</sup> This is why the manner in which we live this life is so important, for by it we make our decision for or against Christ. "With death, our life-choice becomes definitive - our life stands before the judge."<sup>4</sup> Today is a fitting day for us to consider what the choice of my life is, what my life is oriented towards.

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<sup>2</sup> *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer I.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1021.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 45.

This choice can have a multiplicity of forms, for each of our lives is different, but the fundamental choice before us remains the same.

There are some people whose lives are so filled with wickedness that any desire for truth and love has been completely destroyed within them. This is what is meant by the word, "hell." There are also people whose lives are so imbued with love and purity that their love for God flows readily to their neighbor. Such holiness of life clearly marks one for heaven. But such people are not common, are they?

What, then, of the rest of us? What of those of us who want to live holy lives but fail so often? We can presume that in the majority of people

there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God. In the concrete choices of life, however, it is covered over by ever new compromises with evil - much filth covers purity, but the thirst for purity remains, and it still constantly re-emerges from all that is base and remains present in the soul.<sup>5</sup>

What, then, becomes of these souls who are open to and are desirous of truth and love, but whose lives are also marked with sin? "Will all the impurity they have amassed through life suddenly cease to matter?"<sup>6</sup> Certainly not.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

It would go against God's mercy to cast them into hell, but it would also go against his justice for them to enter into heaven straight away with such filth covering their souls. The answer is clear: they must first be purified. Thus we hear the words from the Book of Wisdom: "God tried them and found them worthy of himself. As gold in the furnace, he proved them, and as sacrificial offerings he took them to himself" (Wisdom 3:5-6).

This process of purification is called purgatory for it is a purgation, a cleansing, of the soul. "[Purgatory is] the inwardly necessary process of transformation in which a person becomes capable of Christ, capable of God, and thus capable of unity with the whole communion of saints."<sup>7</sup>

We often speak of the pain of the fire of Purgatory; why do we do so? The Psalmist tells us, "fire goes before [the Lord]; everywhere it consumes the foes" (Psalm 97:4). Saint Paul tells us that we will be saved, "but only as through fire" (I Corinthians 3:15). What is this fire, then, but the fire of love?

The Lord's "burning flame cuts free our closed-off heart, melting it, and pouring it into a new mold to make it fit for

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, Second Edition. Michael Waldstein, trans. with Aidan Nichols, O.P., ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 230.

the living organism of his body."<sup>8</sup> This fire is the encounter with Christ Jesus himself, who is both Judge and Savior, and this encounter with him is the moment of judgment. Many today are afraid of the notion of judgment "because they confuse judgment with petty calculation and give more room to fear than to a loving trust."<sup>9</sup>

Pope Benedict explains this encounter with Jesus most powerfully:

Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms us and frees us, allowing us to become fully ourselves. All that we build during our lives can prove to be mere straw, pure bluster, and it collapses. Yet in the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives becomes evident to us, there lies salvation. His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation "as through fire." But it is also a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally of ourselves and totally of God. In this way the interrelation between justice and grace also becomes clear: the way we live our lives is not immaterial, but our defilement does not stain us forever if we have at least continued to reach out towards Christ, towards truth and towards love... The pain of love becomes our salvation and our joy.<sup>10</sup>

Today's celebration, while it is one of deep sadness as we mourn our beloved dead and pray for them, is also one of profound hope rooted in the love of God.

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Seek That Which Is Above: Meditations Through the Year*, Second Edition. Graham Harrison, trans. (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 2007), 77.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 47.

Let each of us, then, raise our prayers and offer our sufferings to the Father for the Poor Souls in Purgatory. We know that our prayers on their behalf are beneficial to them because, "No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone."<sup>11</sup> We are all one in the Body of Christ. Therefore, let us keep ever in mind the words of St. Ambrose: "We have loved them in life; let us not forget them in death." Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.