

**All Soul's Day
November 2, 2008**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

George Bernard Shaw once said: “Life contains but two tragedies. One is not to get your heart’s desire; the other is to get it.”—and not comprehend.

One of humanity’s fondest heart’s desires is to know that we will live and love beyond death. That dream has been alive since we were first called human. And yet to comprehend *how* it can be so is practically impossible.

One could easily get lost in either the history of this celebration or its theology. I will say a bit about each. But to dwell there is to miss the point of this day rather completely, I fear. Today offers a meditation on death and its significance in *our* lives, for those of us still alive here and now. It is us that All Soul’s Day is really about—our hopes, our dreams, our fondest heart’s desire.

But let’s give the celebration a bit of a context. Christians have revered their dead from the very beginning. Witness Catacomb altars and inscriptions. But the special celebration for the deceased in the Western church originates with the Benedictine Abbey in Cluny in 998. From there it spread to other Benedictine communities and finally to the universal church in the 14th century. It has been celebrated on November 2nd since that time.

The celebration is closely related to the theology about death that predominated at that time—although none of that theology was codified until the Councils of Florence and Trent many centuries later. The theology is based on a particular concept of sin and the notion of Purgatory. This is still the theology enshrined in the latest Catechism of the Catholic Church (§ 1030-1032). It says there: “All who die in God’s grace, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter heaven....The tradition of the church, by reference to certain texts of scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire.”

That expresses rather clearly the original purpose of this day and its “remembrance” significance. But theologies do remain open and are adjusted in dialogue with history and culture. No one less than Benedict XVI himself opined recently (during the Limbo conversations) that this Purgatory need not be a spatial or temporal reality; it could occur, I suppose, in the twinkling of an eye.

In its theological and historical context, then, today’s celebration is intimately related to concept of Purgatory. To sound a bit more modern, but intending no disrespect, I suppose Purgatory today sounds a bit like a

restroom where we can get “spruced-up” for the Beatific Vision. Our souls get “buffed-up” for the big event yet to come. This is still a *current* theology in our church.

Do you notice how the language so utterly fails to capture the intent here? That is so true of most theological language; that’s not anyone’s fault. It’s the nature of the beast; it’s the nature of trying to express in any language the ineffable mystery of life and death and God’s place in it all. As I said at the outset, even if we get our heart’s deepest desire and we live beyond death, it is all but impossible to comprehend *how*, or what it might be like.

One of my most personally revealing moments came to me while at my sister’s death-bed. We were very close and turned to each other often for advice and support and love. On one occasion near the end of her life, she lifted her head toward her little brother, the priest, and asked: “J.A., what will it be like?” We both knew what she was talking about. What will it be like to die?

I turned slowly toward her bed and whispered: “I don’t have any idea.” And then I added that I thought that she would probably be the first to know. She laughed her agreement and said she would try to let me know somehow. She was a person of deep and simple faith. And yet she had no way to

comprehend her heart's deepest desire.

I still don't have a clue what it will be like. And neither does anyone else here. We have hopes, dreams, fantasies (in the best sense of that word), and we have a Promise in which we try to live. "I have come that you might have life, and have it in abundance," and forever (John 10:10). And we have all been baptized into his death in order to rise with him. Without him, none of it makes any sense.

But we live here and now in uncertainty. In our more courageous moments we face Bernard Shaw's two great tragedies. Faith doesn't necessarily make them go away. What if we do *not* get our heart's desire? What if death is the end? And what if we *do* get our heart's desire—but can't comprehend it? I often wonder: did Jesus face the same questions? Did he live—like us in all things, save sin—with the same dilemma?

This day is about us, the living as much as about the dead. It is about the loves of our lives, the dreams of our lives, those with whom we journeyed in life, and all those before us. We pray for all of those who have already died. And we pray for us—for those who still face the uncertainty and the question: what will it be like? And when will it be—for me?

Human responses to the great question of life are varied and often

poignant. I leave you with two brief excerpts from poets' meditations. Dylan Thomas penned these famous lines: "Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Don't judge too quickly that this is not a statement of profound faith. Remember Jesus and his pained prayer of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me (Mark 15: 34, Matthew 27: 46)?"

And a second poem written by Gerard Manley Hopkins: Margaret, are you grieving over Goldengrove unleaving?...It is the blight man was born for. It is Margaret you mourn for."

Let us remember and pray this day for all of life's possibilities. For all our hopes and dreams; and let us pray in gratitude for the Promise itself. And for all those who have walked the path with us and for us and before us. And let us pray for ourselves as well. *Requiescant in pace!*