

Feast of All Souls

11-02-08

News bulletin: the remains of millionaire adventurer Steve Fossett have been discovered on the side of a mountain near Mammoth Lakes, California. Fawcett, 63, had disappeared on Sept. 3, 2007, while flying an experimental single-engine plane. A hiker had recently found Fossett's ID and a large amount of cash in the area. Few of Fossett's remains still existed, although a large bone was found some distance away, possibly carried there by animals. Fossett had made many millions in the financial market. A memorial service has not yet been planned. [pause]

Whether we are rich or poor, famous or unknown, young and healthy or aging and feeble, the same future awaits us all: we will become a memory. And all of us of a certain age have loved ones and dear friends in cemeteries and mausoleums, in urns or perhaps scattered over the earth. Many of their names are listed in our "Book of the Dead" here in front of church. And of course, we all have unknown ancestors, the men and women who made our lives possible, whom we will meet for the first time in heaven.

For a thousand years, the Church has celebrated this feast that we call "All Souls." Although every Mass remembers the dead, today especially we pray for all those who have gone before us.

Remembering is one thing, but does it make sense to actually pray for the dead? Well, it goes way back: in the fifth century, St. Augustine wrote that he was in the "habit" of praying for the dead. And there is a mention in the bible: in the Second Book of

Maccabees in the Old Testament we read that it is a "holy and pious" thought to pray for the dead.

Let me ask you: are any of our spirits or souls truly ready to experience the glory of God? Won't each of us die with still a certain amount of ego or self-centeredness that will need to be purified before we are prepared to completely experience Christ in heaven? That purification process has been called "purgatory." Since there is no sense of "time" after this life, who knows how long purgatory is, or where, or how? It is certainly not a fiery concentration camp that lasts what we call "months" or "years." If there is any fire, it is the burning love of Christ that takes away our remaining impurities.

So, what we are doing today is simply giving our loved ones and ancestors to the purifying love of Jesus, asking him to welcome them to the glory of heaven. And we don't do that in a magical or superstitious way, but simply in love.

I mentioned the millionaire Steve Fossett. You may recall Timothy Leary, the psychologist and professor best known for his experiments with psychedelic drugs. Timothy Leary did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, but he made two interesting requests: 1) his dying was videotaped for posterity. 2) After his cremation, 7 grams of Leary's remains were launched into space on a Pegasus rocket. It remained in orbit for six years, until burning in the atmosphere. [pause] Do you hear the search for immortality?

Our loved ones will live forever! And we will see them again. That is truly comforting. And we too are immortal--no small thing. Some tombs of Roman soldiers had an inscription in Latin, "Gone forever." Christian tombs from the same era were inscribed, "Born into eternity."

Death is the extinguishing of the light. It is putting out the lamp, because the Dawn has come. "May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen."