

Sermon for the Solemnity of All Saints, Nov. 7, 2021
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In the name of the true and living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I've been having some trouble moving my head and heart out of the solemnness and, indeed, the sadness that accompanies the celebration of All Souls Day. I told my husband that I needed something to shake me out of it, so I could prepare my heart for today's joyful occasion, four baptisms and the Solemnity of All Saints. He suggested I visit the Art Institute and see if I could find a little inspiration, something to signal to my heart and my head that it was time to shift gears.

The sun was out on Friday, when I arrived at the museum, and by the time I walked up those stairs flanked by the iconic lions, I actually did feel a little lighter in spirit. Making my way up to the second floor, I prepared to spend a couple hours among a great cloud of witnesses, as depicted in art, anyway.

There was Giovanni Baglione's Francis in ecstasy, caught in the arms of an angel, after fainting from his meditation on the death of Jesus. Another angel presents to him Christ's crown of thorns and the spear that pierced his side. Francis' right hand is clutching a skull in his lap.

This isn't exactly what I had in mind, I thought. And so I moved on.

My eyes were drawn to a painting of Mary and her babe, Jesus, their faces bathed in serene joy. But then, I noticed St. Elizabeth, who watched the mother and child closely, her bright eyes on alert. John the Baptist's hand was extended to the nose of a lamb, but his eyes, too, signaled something other than delight at the miracle in front of them. His face spoke of someone who knew what difficulties were ahead for this miraculous child – and his loving mother.

I sighed and moved on again and was delighted by a resplendent triptych of Mary, again with the child Jesus, surrounded by female saints depicted as ladies in waiting. At first, it appeared just lovely. The brilliant jewel tones of their gowns, their luminous skin, their golden halos, the pastoral setting of grass, flowers, birds. I looked closer, taking in the details and found that these women were holding the very devices with which they were martyred.

My heart and mind certainly shifted gears on this visit, but not in the way I was expecting. Because, save for a painting of John the Evangelist in retirement on a Greek Island (though he was still hard at work penning his gospel even in his old age), painting after painting of the saints spoke not of an easy joy I'd sought. Instead they issued a stern warning: A life of faith in Christ is no cakewalk.

A life of faith in Christ will test you, the saints warned. It will try you, they said. It will ask you again and again and again, to contemplate the Cross, Francis sighed. It will demand of you strength to stand your ground for what is right and true and just, spoke St. Lucy, St. Appolonia, and St. Agnes. It will require you to renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. And it will require you to renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy your fellow creatures of God.

I discovered that one of my favorite pieces in the medieval collection is a wooden altarpiece depicting St. Catherine of Alexandria. At her feet is the spiked wheel that was unsuccessful at bringing her demise, and in her hands, the blade that was.

According to legend, Catherine of Alexandria, a noble woman, was tested and tried for her faith in Christ. She spoke out against the persecution of Christians, the destruction of her fellow creatures of God, and ultimately was persecuted herself.

But in this altar piece, she stands tall, her eyes fixed not on the devices that ultimately meant death for her, but at her fellow followers of Christ.

And she looks triumphant.

The torture device is at her feet, after all. And the sword which took her life is now in her own hands.

A life of faith in Jesus Christ is no cakewalk, Catherine says. *But it will transform you.*

And that is a cause for deep, abiding joy.

Jesus speaks of this kind of joy today in our gospel when he preaches his sermon on the mount about the radical transformation God's reign promises. That reign, which Jesus, God incarnate and among us, has come to inaugurate himself.

The poor in spirit, the mournful, and the meek, he says, will experience transformation. The hungry, the merciful, and the pure in heart, too. And so will the peacemakers, and those persecuted for the sake of righteousness. And the reviled and rejected because of their faith in Christ? They, too, are blessed. All of them, blessed. And their joy and gladness is not fleeting, but it is great and eternal in the kingdom of heaven.

Life in Christ is no cakewalk, but it is worth it.

In just a few moments, we will welcome four new members into this worth it life in Christ.

Gabrielle, Janna, Alexander and Anna have each been on a journey to this day and toward that holy, eternal spring of joy and unending life. The water that fills the font and will be splashed on each of their heads will become a sign of their transformation, their death to their old life and their birth to a new life in Christ.

And they won't be alone.

That is the second thing I took away from my time among the saints on Friday. We walk a holy path together.

One of the ways we'll let Gabby, Janna, Alexander, and Anna know that they're not alone is by reciting the baptismal covenant together. As they make their baptismal promises for the first time, we'll renew ours, as a sign of our unity in the body of Christ.

And so, my prayer is that you and I will find ourselves transformed in speaking our promises aloud together, knowing that the same faith of the saints who've gone before us and that we've committed our lives to is not easy, but it is indeed joyful and shared.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.