**31st Sunday in Ordinary Time – A**

Solemnity of All Saints

**November 1, 2020**

In his book *The Power and the Glory*, novelist Graham Greene describes a priest who ministered to his people in an era of religious persecution in Mexico.

The danger of being caught by the police and the exhausting work of serving his people finally took their toll. The priest turned to drink and became an alcoholic. Eventually he was caught, sentenced to die, and put into prison to wait execution.

When he awoke on the morning of his death, he had an empty brandy flask in his hand. He tried to recite an act of contrition, but he was too confused to remember the words.

Suddenly he caught sight of his own shadow on the wall of the prison cell. He just sat there, staring at it.

As he did, he realized it was foolish of him to think that he was strong enough to remain behind and minister to his people. He should have fled. It was stupid to stay behind. It was a terrible mistake.

Tears began to form in his eyes and roll down his cheeks. He was not crying because he was afraid to die. He was crying because he had to go to God so empty handed.

“It seemed to him at that moment that it would have been easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who had missed happiness by seconds at the appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted – to be a saint.”

The last line of this scene is especially moving and bears repeating: “He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted – to be a saint.”

What does the word *saint* mean?

In the strict sense, the word is reserved for people who have lived such exemplary Christian lives that the church declares them to be in heaven. The church’s official list of saints includes about 2,500 people.

Let me share with you an excerpt from a letter of one such person. It is from a letter of St. Peter Claver, who worked among the black slaves in South African in the 17th century. It reads:

“Yesterday … feast of the Holy Trinity, a great number of black people who had been seized along the African rivers were put ashore from one very large vessel. We hurried out with two baskets full of oranges, lemons, sweet biscuits and all sorts of things….

“We had to force our way through the crowds till we reached the sick. There was a great number of them, lying on damp earth, or rather mud … They were naked without any covering at all.

“We took off our cloaks, went to a store, brought from there all the wood that was available and put it together to make a platform; then, forcing a way through the guards, we eventually managed to carry all the sick to it …

“You should have seen the expression of gratitude in their eyes!

“In this way we spoke to them, not with words but with deeds … any other form of address would have been pointless. Then we sat or knelt beside them and washed their faces and bodies.”

St. Peter Claves wasn’t a martyr. He didn’t spend his days in prayer. He didn’t spend his night doing penance. He didn’t have any visions. He didn’t write any great books on religion. He was an ordinary person like you and me.

The purpose of All Saints is to honor people like Peter Claver and to hold them up to us as reminders and as inspirations.

First, the remind us of our own calling to be saints. That is, we are called to live our lives in a way that after death we too will merit eternal life.

Second, saints like Peter Claver inspires us. They show us that it is possible to be a saint. It is not something beyond our reach. Not at all! As the priest in the novel discovered, all it asks of us is “a little self-restraint and a little courage.”

The priest was right. Being a saint does not mean imitating someone who was martyred centuries ago. Being a saint means imitating ordinary people who lived in ordinary times, much like our own.

It means imitating people who laughed and cried, just as we do. It means imitating people who sinned and used the Sacrament of Reconciliation, just as we do. It means imitating people who tried again and sometimes sinned again, just as we do.

If such people had anything extraordinary about them, it was that they never stopped trying to live each day in a gospel way.

This is what the Feast of All Saints is about. It’s about honoring people like Peter Claver. And in the course of honoring them, we are reminded of our own calling to be saints and are inspired to pursue that calling.

Let us close by paraphrasing the words of poet John Oxenham:

*“To everyone there opens a way – a high way and a low way. The high soul takes the high way; the low soul takes the low way. And in between on the misty flats, the rest drift to and fro.*

*“But to everyone there opens a way – a high way and a low way. And everyone decides the way his soul shall go.”*

May the saints who have gone before us pray for each one of us here that we may have the courage to choose the high way.