

FEAST OF ALL SAINTS 2009
(Revelation 7: 2-4, 9-14; 1John 3: 1-3; Matthew 5: 1-12a)

WE BEAR THE SEAL OF THE LIVING GOD

Until almost the end of her life, my Mom continued to be a devoted gardener. She had an extensive vegetable garden and, among other things, she would plant at least 150 tomato plants every year. This meant that she also had to be devoted to canning much of this produce. Some of these canned goods she kept for her family and a lot she gave away.

Canning is hard work. But my Mom always thought it was worth it because things taste so much better canned. One of the things you have to make sure of is that the jars seal properly. I remember many times being in the kitchen when the lids of the mason jars would make a popping sound – indicating that they were safely sealed. Occasionally, a lid would not seal and Mom would have to heat the jar or jars all over again to make sure that the contents would be properly preserved.

In today's first reading (from the Book of Revelation), we hear that God seals us to preserve us for everlasting life. This is a wonderful reality! God loves us so much that he has done his best to keep us from spoiling our lives through sin. We got sealed in our Baptism and also through our Confirmation, which is the completion of Baptism. When the Bishop confirms us, he says: "Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit." In some way or other, whether through a concrete sacramental rite or not, God by his grace has sealed all humanity. That is the meaning of this reading from Revelation.

The Book of Revelation, the very last book of the Bible, is often misunderstood – especially in our day. Many Christians believe that this book predicts the future and that some of the happenings in today's world are forecast in this scripture. But Catholics do not believe this. We believe that St. John, the author of Revelation (and the same one who wrote the fourth gospel) intended to write not about a literal future but about a theological future. This book thus tells about no historical events except those of John's own time. In the Book of Revelation, a seer looks all the way into the future to the very end of time and in a poetic way and in a way full of strong and beautiful images this seer sees that God wants to take care of us and all people. Thus God seals us – preserves us to eternal life. This book is about God's doing all he can to keep us from being spoiled (just as my mother did her best to keep her produce from going bad). If we don't make it to eternal life, it's our own fault – not God's.

This first reading says that the angels who do the sealing come from the east. This means they come from the source of light and life – the direction of the rising sun and the direction of the Risen Christ. To the readers of St. John's time, this sealing would have brought to mind the seal of a king who used a ring to make an impression in hot wax to seal a letter – to preserve it for the eyes of the intended recipient and for no one else's eyes. Nowadays we lick envelopes to seal them – not quite as interesting as sealing in wax. And e-mails are not sealed at all and are really not very secure (as we all know). But God's sealing is firm and very secure like the sealing with wax. By the way, we still have the remnants of the king's seal. When the president speaks, there is often on the front of his podium a replica of the "Seal of the President of the United States." And Ohio and all

the states also have seals. These seals of the U.S. and the states are historical relics of the seals of kings.

St. John's sealing would also remind folks of his time of the sealing of wine bottles and of other goods with the unique wax seal of the particular vineyard or merchant. Thus each one of God's creation (each one of us) is sealed with the Seal of the Living God – God's distinctive mark of love for all his people.

Today we celebrate that Feast Day of all those who have been preserved through the trials of life and have entered into the eternal joy of being with the One who sealed them. This is the Festival of All Saints. This is the day when we rejoice with the church over the countless multitudes of folks who are in heaven. These are the ones whose goodness we have touched either directly (in our own loved ones) or indirectly (in the many saints of history – both canonized or not). At this particular Mass, we commemorate all those men and women, our dear ones, who have died during this past year. We have an abiding trust that they are among those whom God has preserved to eternal life. We have this trust because our loved ones have, by God's grace, lived out the Beatitudes of today's Gospel (from Matthew). It is significant that the Gospel reading for All Saints Day is not from the Ten Commandments or some other list of rules for Christian living. The serious Christian lives out the commandments, of course, but he or she goes further to imitate Jesus who practiced what he preached in the Beatitudes and in the Sermon on the Mount which the Beatitudes introduce in Matthew's Gospel. Somewhere in the Vatican there is a list of all the canonized saints. The people we remember at this Liturgy are written in our hearts. We know they are saints – sealed by God who preserves them for everlasting joy.

And our hearts have known love from the experience of these saints in our lives. We have known love from the experience of our mothers and grandmothers – so forgetful of selves and so quietly generous. We have known love from our fathers and grandfathers – so strong in virtue and yet so patient with us. We have experienced love from siblings – so close to us that, like Jacob and God wrestling, we can hurt them and they can hurt us and still we cannot live without them! Some of us have known love from spouses and fiancé whose hearts were and are as one with ours. Some of us have known love from our children who can drive you crazy at times, but for whom most parents would gladly give their lives if it came to it. We have known love from our aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews and cousins and other relatives – so filled with a goodness that spilled over to embrace their extended families. We have experienced love from our friends who are or were like brothers or sisters to us and without whom our lives would be the poorer. We have known love from those who sacrifice for God and neighbor like the ones (including many here present) who are always ready to reach out to the lowly, the poor, and the troubled. We have known love from those who sacrifice for our freedom like the veterans and those who still serve America today. We have known love from teachers and priests and colleagues and others who were and are there for us with a selfless devotion and whose greatest reward is simply to see us happy and successful.

So these are All the Saints! Our heart's experience tells us they who have gone before us are with God who sealed them to save them for endless life and peace. These same folks who have passed away also remain very close to us. I once saw a tombstone in Ireland that read: "She has gone no further from us than to God and God is always very near." Our hearts also tell us that the person sitting next to us is part of the Communion

of Saints and that, despite the common human weakness that we all share, each of us belongs to God and to each other through the Sealing of the Living God. There may be some days when we doubt that there is any good in the world. But the Feast of All Saints reminds us that Good will never die because God has preserved Good in each human being whom he has sealed. We are all sinners, yes; but, more importantly, we are, by God's grace, All Saints.